Guardian of the God - Gods Appearance

Book 5 of the Guardian of the Spirit Series

Uehashi Nahoko

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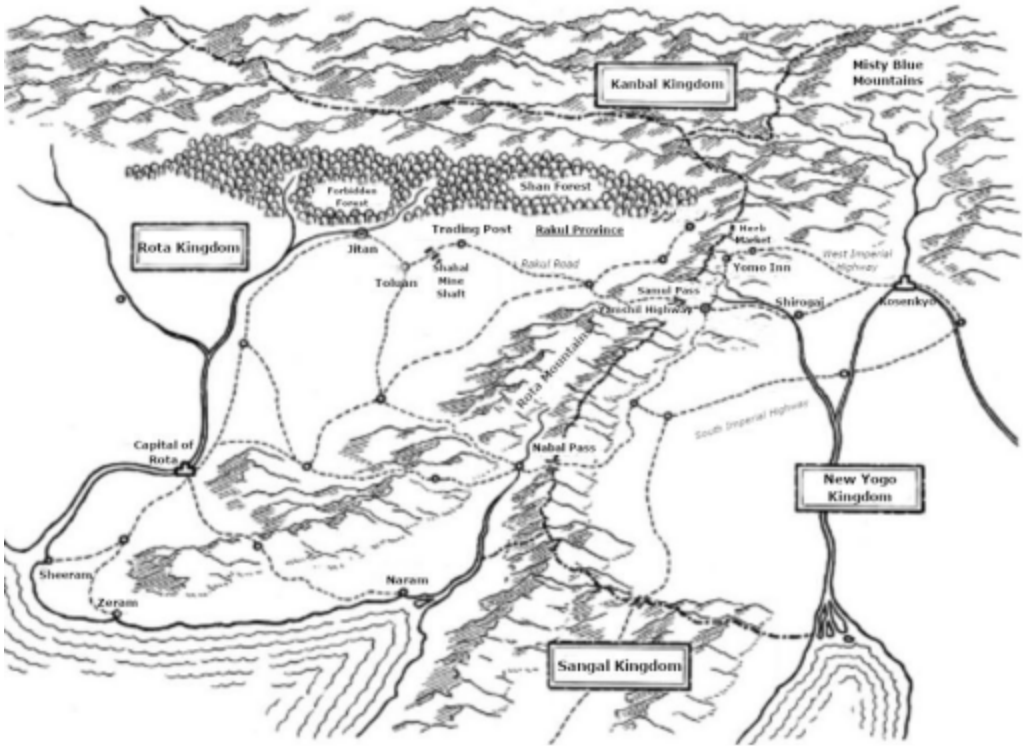
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Prologue - Massacre at Shintadan

The moon cast a harsh cold light upon the earth. In the pale light, scattered warriors galloped their horses across the plain. They carried pine torches aloft in their left hands, illuminating their trail while leaving the rest of the world in half-dark.

The riders crested a small, steep hill. The torches they carried cast the view below them in an indistinct ring of light. Shintadan prison fortress lay ahead of them. High walls surrounded the fortress on all sides, and torches could be seen burning along the top of each wall. Inside the walls, three watchtowers were visible. Light streamed from the windows of the watchtowers as well.

"We can't see what they're doing," one of the riders called out to the leader of the group. The rider adjusted the reins of his swift horse.

Both the leader and his horse stood perfectly still and silent as they stared down at the fortress. "You're right. We can't see at all. It would take a red-collared pigeon about half an hour to fly there from here, so we should be able to make out more detail. But I can't tell why it's so quiet. I don't even hear the watchdogs barking."

The warrior stared straight at the prison fortress from beneath his crude dome-shaped helm. He wore leather chest armor and a shortbow was strapped to his back. The hilt of the sword at his hip was attached to a tassel of blue thread mixed with gold to indicate his rank as the captain of the squad.

"We'll spit into two groups. Everyone from Schuld to Dolm, come with me. We'll go in the main gates. Everyone else, stay twenty horse lengths behind us. If anything should happen, don't try to save us. Report back to Makal fortress.

"We don't know what shape our enemy will take, but we should assume they've taken control of the fortress. They may have laid traps for us. Be on your guard!"

His voice echoed across the plain. The riders distributed themselves in a fan shape behind him and called assent back to their leader in deep voices.

While descending the hill, the riders became increasingly more anxious. Where was the enemy? They saw no soldiers. Where would an enemy hide, if their goal was to break people out of prison?

The people here had been imprisoned on orders from the king, and breaking them out of prison was an act of treason. Shintadan was a small provincial prison fortress that held only commoners of the lower classes. Unbelievable rumors had circulated that a clan of some accused prisoners had risked everything, including their own lives, just to save them.The border of New Yogo was close to Shintadan. New Yogo and Rota were close allies, and the Yogo people were not warlike, so it was extremely unlikely that they would have attacked the fortress.

The armed riders descended the hill onto the flat land below and drew their swords. They held their pine torches in their left hands and their weapons in their right hands; they guided their horses skillfully using only their legs. The walls of the fortress towered over them. There was no sign of a ladder or any other means an enemy could have used to scale them. It was silent as death all around. When they caught sight of the bridge over the deep moat, the riders frowned.

The drawbridge was down, and the main gates were wide open. The light from the watchtowers bathed the fortress' walls in dim light.

"Ah!" One of the riders sucked in a breath and pulled sharply up on his horse's reins. He dismounted as rapidly as flight and leaned over a large black lump on the ground. He called to his comrades, "This soldier is dead!"

The captain of the riders dismounted next to the soldiers corpse. He frowned deeply as he looked it over by the light of his torch. "What's the meaning of this? How did it happen?"

The man lay face down, completely covered in blood, but his wounds hadn't been made by a blade or an arrow. The skin covering the nape of

his neck had been shaved off as if by sandpaper. Chunks of flesh had come loose from the wounds.

"He looks like he's been gnawed on by wolves," the captain muttered.

On the other side of him, a rider called out, "Captain! There's another one!"

And there was, identical to the first: lying face-down with severe injuries that had not been made with any obvious weapon. Based on their orientation, the dead men had rushed here from the direction of the moat.

The captain gazed up at the main gate with a dumbfounded expression. "If those men were attacked by wolves, they would have been running toward the safety of the walls--not away from them. There was something in the fortress that chased them here. But that's impossible. It's not like an entire wolf pack could find its way in."

The riders faced the fortress and slowly moved toward it. When they passed inside the gates, they saw something terrible.

Silent bodies were scattered around the gates. Prisoners and guards alike laid still and dead, with their throats ripped out or the skin at the back of their necks torn away. If there was anyone left alive, it would be the guards inside the inner walls, the prisoners that were kept further inside, and the dogs that were kenneled alongside the drainage ditches that fed the moat.

Any survivors would have heard the riders approach, but no one came to meet them. They must be utterly terrified if they lacked the courage to even leave the walls of the fortress. The riders shivered as if cold water had been dumped over their heads and cantered further into the eerily silent prison fortress without saying a word.

There were no wolf tracks anywhere. The prisoners' workshop was intact. Various unfinished crafts were lined up on low platforms outside the workshop as if the prisoners had abandoned them suddenly. If there had been a wolf attack, the riders would expect some of these to be disturbed or damaged, but none of them were.

As the riders went deeper and deeper into Shintadan fortress, they became convinced that wolves had not caused this disaster.

"Captain! Come look at this!" one of the riders called out in surprise. He pointed to the stocks that were used to punish and humiliate prisoners that got out of line. On the side of one of the pine platforms was a substance like butter or fat, and the surface of the platform had been smoothed down so well it looked like it had been shaved and sanded.

"What the hell is this stuff?" the rider asked.

But they had no time to discover the meaning behind the mysterious substance along the side of the platform; there was too much else to examine. On one side of the fortress there was a wall formed by small stones piled together; this wall showed clear signs of an animal attack. Whatever the beast was, it had raked down the side of the wall with huge claws, leaving a long, deep gash.

A rider discovered one dead body that showed no signs of being attacked by an animal. The body was a woman's; she'd been executed in the open space in the center of the prison yard.

The captain of the riders led his men up to the higher level of the prison fortress to get a better look at the carnage from above. When he looked down, the captain briefly lost the ability to speak.

What had happened here? It looked as if a giant had cut down everything below with one swing of a mighty scythe. Bodies were scattered in a radial pattern around the woman's execution site in the yard.

The captain was a brave man, but even he couldn't keep his knees from shaking. *This wasn't a wolf attack. If this isn't some sort of nightmare, what is it?*

The pale moonlight cast the bodies below in a corona of light like the sheen of frost. No one in the prison fortress had survived.

Part One

Chapter 1 - The Autumn Herb Market

Her first step into the dim herbalist's store blocked out the noise and bright autumn light of the world outside. Balsa felt like she'd suddenly been dropped inside a medicine jar. She followed close on Tanda's heels as he walked through the store. Shelves boxed them in to either side, piled high from floor to ceiling with a huge supply of herbs and medicinal ingredients. The air was thick with the smell of dried herbs. Balsa wrinkled her nose.

There was a large table inside the shop. Behind it stood the proprietor, a middle-aged man; in front of it many men and women lined up to make orders. Most of them looked like travelers. Balsa identified many people from New Yogo, but some were obviously from Rota or Sangal. Tanda bent to remove his carryall sack from his back, then joined the other people in line.

Many other stores were lined up on the western road outside the herbalist's shop, packed closely together from here to Rota's border with New Yogo. For the most part, all these shops sold effective ingredients for medicines: rare mushrooms, precious herbs, and fruits and other foods known for their immune-boosting effects. The Herb Market was held once a year in autumn, and lasted only three days. Despite this limitation, many people from foreign nations gathered together to make purchases from the market.

The sound of flutes and the rhythmic beating of drums came from outside the shop. People clapped to the beat and laughed as they listened to the music. The song was vaguely familiar to Balsa, and she adjusted her grip on her spear and leaned a little toward the direction of the sound.

Tanda had said to her some weeks ago, "I want to go to the Herb Market. Want to come with me?" That's why she was here now. He'd been severely injured at the beginning of summer, and she'd decided to

stay with him until he'd completely recovered. For the first time in a long while, Balsa had spent most of the summer and autumn with Tanda and his master, the magic weaver Torogai, in safety and relative peace. Their home was in the heart of the Misty Blue Mountains of New Yogo, about a day's walk from Kosenkyo, the country's capital city.

Balsa was a bodyguard by profession, but the year she'd turned thirty, she'd considered turning to another line of work. But as the days and months had passed and her ideas remained only ideas, she'd realized that she didn't really want to live any other way.

At the arrival of this year's autumn, when the mountains had been adorned in bright gold, she'd started feeling the restless urge to travel somewhere. Tanda must have sensed that and invited her to come on a ten-day journey to this makeshift town on the Rota border for the Herb Market. He'd attended every year for at least a decade without fail. He gathered the best herbs from the mountains in New Yogo, dried them, then brought them to this market to exchange for others that were more difficult for him to procure himself. He also sold his own medicines and bought others before returning home.

Balsa couldn't stand the cloying atmosphere of the shop any longer and retreated toward the door. She preferred the smells of horses, dust and sweat from outside. She stood in the doorway and listened to the conversations of customers as they came and went. Their voices washed over her like a wave. She identified speakers of Yogoese, the languages of Rota, and Sangalese, though the latter nation was quite far to the south.

Balsa had traveled widely, and could usually tell where a person came from based on how they spoke. The main language of Rota was very similar to her native Kanbalese, so she could speak it without much effort.

Among the aimless rush of people coming and going, two merchants from Sangal passed her by. They walked with a boy of perhaps thirteen or fourteen and a girl that looked like his younger sister sandwiched between them. The boy and the girl were striking enough to attract

many eyes, but they were clearly malnourished and far too thin. The girl was especially pale, and the light in her eyes was distant and unfocused, like the flame of a candle about to be blown out.

The girl stumbled as if she'd slipped on a small stone, and the merchant standing next to her scolded her harshly. "Watch where you're going, shattoi." Shattoi meant "stray dog" in the local Rota dialect.

Balsa frowned. She had negative associations with the word shattoi. When she'd been about ten years old, her foster father Jiguro had taken work as a bodyguard for a merchant in Rota. The son of his employer had called Balsa that to tease and humiliate her.

People in Rota were much like the people of Kanbal when it came to prizing blood ties and kinship. Wanderers with no family or home to speak of were generally looked down upon with contempt. Looking back on that experience now, Balsa supposed that she *had* been contemptible, and not just in the eyes of the merchant's son.

Jiguro had always taken great pains to ensure that Balsa would not starve, but he'd cared considerably less about other matters, such as clothing or hairstyle. Growing up, Balsa only had two outfits at any given time, and they were always secondhand in faded colors. Sometimes her clothes had holes in them here and there, and the holes were usually the signal to Jiguro to buy her a new outfit. If she'd bothered him more about clothes, she was certain he would have bought them for her, but Balsa hadn't really viewed herself as a little girl in those days. All she'd wanted was to be as strong as Jiguro so that she could destroy his enemies. Rage had boiled constantly within her. At hearing the word shattoi again, she remembered surrendering to that rage.

The Rotan merchant's son had probably been around fourteen years old, but he'd been as tall as most adults. She had no idea why he'd chosen her as a target, but he'd bullied her mercilessly from the first. She knew even when she was young that it was a bad idea to fight with the son of Jiguro's employer, so she'd done her best to avoid him when possible and ignore him whenever they had to be in the same place.

But one day, one of their pursuers caught up to Jiguro and Balsa. Balsa's real father Karuna had been the physician of Kanbal's king, but the king's younger brother Rogsam had coerced him into poisoning the king so that Rogsam could seize power. If Karuna had refused Rogsam's orders, both he and the six-year-old Balsa would have been killed.

In this crisis, Karuna had begged his best friend Jiguro to take Balsa and run in order to save her life. Jiguro had been highly respected as the most powerful warrior in all of Kanbal, and was an esteemed member of an elite group of nine men that guarded the king, known as the King's Spears. He'd also been well-regarded inside the royal palace. At seeing his friend's utter desperation, he had thrown away everything in his life to flee Kanbal and protect Balsa.

But no matter where they ran, they'd been followed. Jiguro was strong, but his pursuers were King's Spears like himself. They were also his dear friends. Being forced to kill them was indescribably painful for Jiguro. Even when she'd been very young, Balsa had always been able to feel the aura of pain and despair radiating from him every time after he'd killed a friend.

The day their pursuer had found them in Rota, the fierce battle between Jiguro and his opponent had lasted all day until the evening. When it was finally over, Jiguro had gone to bury his friend in the open meadow surrounding the merchant's camp. She didn't remember him saying anything during the burial.

Balsa had witnessed the entire terrible struggle to the death. The stench of blood had hung heavy in the air until well into that night. She'd stood a little ways away from Jiguro and the grave and shook until she'd felt like she would fly apart. Jiguro hadn't so much as glanced at her. Balsa remembered feeling like she'd turned to smoke and disappeared, she'd been so lonely.

After the funeral was over, Jiguro had removed his blood-spattered coat, rolled it into a ball in his hands, and walked morosely away from her without saying a word. He'd walked all the way to a small hut behind the lodging house they were staying at with the merchant, entered in, and shut the door firmly behind him.

Balsa had remained outside the hut all alone, staring at the closed door. She remembered the shadows of the many shala trees growing in the garden near the hut with perfect clarity. While looking at the

shifting shadows of the thin branches, she'd felt Jiguro's despair, and her own at being ignored in such a heartless way.

It was at that moment that the merchant's son had approached her. He'd seemed agitated, but she never found out why. He'd stood in Balsa's shadow and insulted her as he always did, then spat in her hair.

"Shattoi, you stink! You're stinking up the garden. Get in that hut so I don't have to smell you anymore."

It was the first time she'd ever wanted to hit someone. She'd wanted to hit him so hard that he'd never get up again. It was a good thing she hadn't been carrying her short spear then, or she was certain she would have killed him.

Giving into her rage had felt glorious. She'd kicked the boy in the knee, and he'd collapsed to the ground, hard. She'd straddled him and kept hitting him until his face was drenched with blood. Her fist had made contact with his teeth and she'd felt her knuckles split open but she hadn't cared: she'd been too caught up in her emotions to notice something like that. She'd howled like a stray dog and continued to beat the boy bloody.

Balsa swallowed as she remembered the sensation of Jiguro seizing her collar from behind. She'd twisted in his grip like a wild animal, kicking and thrashing until she was thrown to the ground with a loud thud. When she was down, Jiguro had grabbed her by the throat and pinned her.

"Did he bully you so badly you intend to kill him?"

The rage in his voice had frightened her so much that she hadn't been able to look at him. She'd felt her anger cool instantly, changing immediately into pure terror. While teaching her the spear, Jiguro had often knocked her down and hit her without holding back, but aside from those times he'd never harmed her. That's why she'd been so scared: she'd never attacked another person before. She'd looked up at Jiguro reluctantly, shaking with genuine fear.

She couldn't stand thinking about Jiguro as he'd been then. He'd been cruel. She'd been a young girl drunk on rage and covered in blood

with her own fists bleeding, and he had completely terrified her. Why was she remembering all this *now*?

Balsa watched the merchants and the children pass by the shop. The girl that had been called shattoi leaned backwards toward the boy, who seemed to be supporting her as they walked. The dim unsteady light in the girl's eyes made Balsa's chest ache with remembered pain.

As she watched the children vanish in the crowd, someone tapped her on the shoulder. Tanda stood next to her. "What's wrong? Your face is terrifying."

When Balsa glanced over at the kind face of her oldest friend, the ossified feelings of rage and pain from her memories loosened their grip on her. "Nothing's wrong. Did you sell everything already?"

"Yeah, sure did. For a good price, too."

Balsa smiled. "I'm glad."

Chapter 2 - The Blue Hand's Hidden Fangs

There were excellent natural hot springs near the Herb Market. Many visitors that came to the market also looked forward to using the hot springs. The inns lining the street all had signage in front of their entrances: swords, or horses, or flags of different colors. These symbols and colors represented price ranges and the quality of services offered at each of the inns, including the type of access given to the hot springs. Many merchants of the same class stayed at inns that had the same signage in order to make connections and trade with others of their own status.

The inn Balsa and Tanda had chosen was a bit farther removed from the main road than the others. It was far from the side of the mountain where many of the other inns were, but it was very close to the center of the market. The two of them had reserved a room earlier and unloaded their things on the upper level of the inn. The inn was large and sprawled over multiple buildings; most were connected to one another by a wide passageway that descended from the main level down to the dining and cooking areas.

This inn was one where many magic weavers, artists and artisans stayed. When they entered the inn's half-circle shaped entrance hall, they saw a small monkey sitting quietly on the packed gravel floor. The monkey wore a piece of red cloth around its neck, indicating that he belonged to an artist of some kind. The monkey wore no leash and no one attended him, but he sat there still and calm.

"Isn't he cute?" Tanda asked. He smiled down at the monkey. Tanda loved animals and insects. Animals especially seemed to sense this about him, and this monkey was no exception: he lifted his face and happily let Tanda pet him. He showed no signs of wanting to bite or claw at anyone at all.

Tanda's face while petting the monkey did not remotely resemble that of a thirty-year-old man's. Balsa sighed and took a seat on one of the wooden planks near the door, then removed her shoes. A woman working at the inn came over to wash her feet. She didn't wash Balsa's feet with ordinary cold water, but with warm water from the hot springs.

"Welcome back," the woman said. "Will you be eating dinner here tonight?"

Balsa called out to Tanda: "What d'you think? Should we eat here?"

Tanda gave the monkey one last pat on the head and stood up. He nodded at the woman. "Thanks for always taking such good care of us, Toma. Are there any fried mushrooms on the dinner menu today?"

Toma nodded and smiled. "You've made an excellent choice! I'll make you fried hachal mushrooms for dinner."

"I guess we're eating here," Tanda said to Balsa. "The food's great."

The two of them used the water Toma brought them to wash off the dust of the road, then walked down the passageway connecting the inn's main building to the dining area below. Both the kitchen and dining area were in separate buildings away from the inn to help prevent a fire from breaking out.

The sun was just about to set. The cool autumn breeze felt wonderful against their newly washed skin. When they entered the dining area, they saw that three fires had been lit in pits dug into the ground. The entire place was packed close with people. Smoke hung heavily in the air. Dining tables surrounded the cooking fires. Dinner had just begun, and many people of different nations were sitting down to eat together.

Balsa and Tanda looked for a place to sit. A middle-aged man sitting near the outer wall enclosing the dining area waved at them. "Hey! Is that you, Tanda?"

When Tanda looked at the man, his eyes lit up in recognition. "Sufar!" He turned to Balsa. "He's a Rotan magic weaver. I met him here

before, while traveling with Master Torogai. He's a good man, and a good magic weaver--even Torogai respects him. Let's eat with him."

Balsa nodded and followed after Tanda. Sufar stood up from his seat and came to greet them. There was a hawk called a maro perched on his left shoulder. The bird was only about as large as an adult's closed fist. Even when Sufar stood up, the hawk didn't move at all, but stood still as a statue. Its sharp eyes gleamed with keen intelligence. Balsa didn't think that hawks like that could see very well in the dark, but she got the sense that this one could see perfectly well.

Balsa felt like she and Tanda were being inspected in some way as they approached Sufar. Sufar had a slight build, and was about as tall as Balsa. He appeared to be in his fifties. His hair was cropped short, and his hair and beard were flecked with gray. As she observed his actions with the hawk, she gained some idea of the type of magic weaving he must have mastered. His light brown eyes shone with the light of his hidden abilities.

Tanda and Sufar gripped one another by the wrist, greeting one another in traditional Rotan fashion. "It's been too long, Sufar. I'm glad you found us."

Sufar smiled at Tanda and returned his greeting, but he didn't seem to know what to make of Balsa, who was standing behind Tanda. Ordinarily he might assume that Balsa was Tanda's wife or lover, but he felt the unmistakable aura of a warrior surrounding her. For her part, Balsa sensed that Sufar was a powerful warrior as well.

As Tanda took in Sufar's expression, he said, "Sufar, this is Balsa, my childhood friend. She works as a bodyguard, and wields a short spear."

Sufar's eyes widened slightly. "Balsa the short-spear wielder," he said in fluent Yogoese. "Are you the bodyguard that saved Crown Prince Chagum's life? If so, I can't believe my good luck. As a magic weaver, I am keenly interested in your exploits. I heard the tale in a song, but I would very much enjoy it if you would provide me with the precise details of your adventure over dinner."

Balsa had only been able to save Chagum with Tanda and Torogai's help, and the assistance of several others. A water spirit from a supernatural world called Nayugu had laid an egg inside Crown Prince Chagum of New Yogo. Because of it, Chagum's life had been threatened by monsters that had wanted to eat the egg, and by his own father, the Mikado, who'd sent assassins to kill him.

While eating a delicious dinner, the three of them talked easily together in a friendly way. Tanda did most of the talking, though Balsa occasionally contributed certain points of clarification. The story they had to tell was a long one, so Sufar had the opportunity to observe them both at his leisure. Sufar was an insatiably curious man. All magic weavers were a bit odd and hungry for knowledge--and perhaps even a little sinister--but being possessed of simple curiosity didn't make Sufar the kind of magic weaver that manipulated the shadows in people's hearts. Sufar intended nothing ill in his observations, but occasionally his pointed, personal questions hit close to home, revealing his sharp intellect and perceptive insight.

After dinner, the three of them continued talking over glasses of a wine called maral. The topic of conversation shifted to current strange goings-on in the Rota kingdom. There was news of some kind of enemy raid on a prison called Shintadan. Reinforcements had been sent to relieve the prison. They'd discovered that all the prisoners and guards had been slaughtered, both in and outside the walls. It was disturbing and terrifying news.

"Around thirty people were found dead, but there was no sign of enemy forces at all?" Tanda asked.

Sufar drained his glass and placed it on the table. "By chance, I was nearby at Makal fortress at the time of the discovery. All the reinforcements sent to relieve Shintadan were seasoned warriors, but when they came back they looked like their bones had been turned to ice. I rushed to Shintadan immediately after they returned. What I saw there was..." He paused and ran his hands up and down the stem of his glass. He continued in a whisper, "I never thought to see such a sight in this world. At first I thought it was a wolf attack, because a lot of the

bodies had what appeared to be bite wounds. But it wasn't a wolf attack. The attack came from something not of this world." He described the various magic weaving methods he'd used to examine the site of the massacre. He said he'd seen the eyes of dogs that burned like hot coals. Tanda leaned forward, listening eagerly and nodding whenever he recognized or understood one of Sufar's methods or visions.

Balsa thought the names given to some of the magic weaving techniques were too long and complicated, and lost track of where the conversation was going. She didn't really get magic weaving.

The other people in the dining hall finished eating and left. The crowd around them thinned out as Sufar and Tanda talked. Eventually, the only people remaining in the hall with them and Balsa were a few groups of people drinking together in the corners of the room.

Balsa's gaze fell on a group of four men sitting directly across from her, arranged around a corner table. She frowned at them as if they smelled bad. The two men whose faces she could see were the merchants from Sangal she'd seen leading the two children somewhere earlier in the day. One of them had called the girl shattoi.

The Blue Hand.

Thanks to her long years in the bodyguarding profession, Balsa was familiar with the seedy underworld that lurked beneath the surface of everyday reality. It was only natural for her to remember the faces of men that were obviously slave traders. She glanced at them sidelong and verified that they were indeed slave merchants, and that they belonged to the Blue Hand. She remembered seeing the man that had insulted the girl some years before, throwing his weight around in Kosenkyo, the capital of New Yogo.

Technically, slavery was illegal in New Yogo. But there were people that were desperately poor and willing to sell one child if doing so could prevent the rest of the family from starving. The Blue Hand took advantage of these critically impoverished people. And sometimes a family in New Yogo would need another worker, in which case foreign

merchants would sell people from their own countries in order to make money.

Balsa remembered that the children she'd seen that afternoon had been good-looking. They'd probably sell for a high price. Her heart felt heavy in her chest. Those children were complete strangers, and many children in the world were sold into slavery, and would continue to be. She told herself all this, but it was too late; she'd already decided to involve herself. She didn't want that little girl to fall into the darkness of such an uncertain future.

The slave merchants from Sangal drained their glasses and stood up.

"Hey...could you wait a moment?" Balsa called out to them. She stood up and followed the men, leaving Tanda and Sufar behind.

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Chikisa held on to his little sister's hand with all his might. Her face was as pale as if it had been drained of blood. The merchants that were keeping them until they could be sold had force-fed them at meals for the past several days. Today, there'd been so much food on the table that they never would have been able to eat it all. They'd never eaten so much meat or foods fried in oil in their lives before, and their stomachs hurt horribly after every meal.

But Chikisa's stomach didn't just hurt because of the food. Chikisa knew what the men intended to do with them, and the thought of it made his guts roil.

They were going to sell Asra. They hadn't acquired the two of them to be their own personal slaves; they intended to use Asra's pretty face to turn a profit. Chikisa and Asra were Tal people. Their culture and heritage was looked down upon in Rota, but that wouldn't matter at all in New Yogo. Chikisa had known the merchants' intentions the second they'd fallen in with them, but encountering them really had seemed like good luck at the time. They'd been able to escape that awful prison

before any soldiers from Rota captured and killed them like dogs on the side of the road.

The moment his mother had been executed flashed across Chikisa's memory. His chest hurt like it had been torn open, and he gritted his teeth to help bear the pain. He had no time now to cry about his mother's death. He had to protect Asra.

How had something so awful happened to them? Why had their mother done such a thing to Asra? He felt like Asra had been cursed by something horrifying. He remembered his mother cupping Asra's face in her hands before she died. Asra's eyes had glowed with an eerie light. His mother's expression had terrified him. He shuddered at the memory.

"Don't be afraid," their mother had said. "Other people are wrong about us. They are blinded by the brightness of the light. While staring at the light, they believe they are seeing the darkness. This is the same thing. Other people can't understand it."

Their mother had repeated those words over and over again as if she was trying to make Asra believe her by force of will. Chikisa hadn't believed her at all. Asra hadn't said a word since her death. When food was placed in her mouth, she chewed and swallowed. She went to the bathroom on her own, and slept and woke each morning as usual. But she hadn't spoken to anyone at all. She hadn't so much as glanced Chikisa's way since they'd left the prison.

Sometimes, when he squeezed Asra's hand, she'd squeeze back. He guessed that Asra was still in there somewhere, but something had happened to her on a fundamental level. He felt sorry for her. He used to tease her and fight with her all the time, but now he felt nothing but pity for her. Their mother was dead. They could never go home again.

Five years ago, their father Makkara had been killed by a wolf pack while setting traps in the forest. Chikisa and Asra used to have a normal family with a mother and father, but now they only had each other. The only one that could protect Asra now was Chikisa, but he felt powerless.

What will happen to us now? If he was older, he'd take Asra and run. They'd find some way to survive. He was sure there'd be more choices for them if he was an adult.

Chikisa heard the voices of the slave traders outside the door. The key turned in the lock and the door opened, revealing the slave traders and two other men that Chikisa had never seen before. As they entered the room, Chikisa knew that he wasn't done being scared yet.

A merchant that looked Rotan turned to face the slave traders. His companion had the features of someone from Yogo. The Yogo merchant approached Chikisa and Asra, speaking in a low and sonorous voice. He extended his hand slowly and gripped Asra's chin, then tilted his head to take a closer look at her. When Chikisa tried to slap the man's hand away, the slaver punched Chikisa hard in the face.

Chikisa's head slammed into the wall behind him. The inside of his head echoed as if someone had just rung a gong inside it. He almost passed out.

Asra's blank, doll-like expression turned into a frown. She'd been at least half-asleep up to this point. She felt like she'd been enclosed in a dark quiet place, soothed by murmurs and echoes. She'd seen a smooth

clear lake there, and beyond it her brother's face and the rest of the outside world had been only faintly visible.

When she heard Chikisa gasp in pain, something within her responded and began flowing into her heart from within. Her eyes became clear and alert. She saw a man she didn't know standing in front of her. He looked at her with clear contempt, and his cold stare was positively frightening.

"Hm. How about three silvers for this one?" the man muttered.

The Rotan merchant standing behind him laughed. "Let's dispense with your foolish attempts at bargaining. She's exactly what I told you she was. We only bring in the most attractive girls. We've worked together for a long time, so I expect you to pay what we agreed on."

The man holding Asra's chin let her go, stood up and faced the Rotan merchant. His slow, deliberate way of moving made him appear even more terrifying. "Three silver's my best offer. She's sickly-looking. There are plenty of good-looking girls on the market, but no one'll buy one that's sure to die quickly."

The Rotan merchant looked at him in sullen silence, then pointed to Chikisa. "You'll have to sell this one with her. Pay a gold coin for both of them, as you promised."

The man with the terrifying eyes drew the sword from his hip before anyone could blink. "I don't need another starving brat. If you keep complaining, it's not gold I'll give you, but this blade in your chest."

As Asra listened to their exchange, she finally understood what was happening. Her eyes snapped open wide. They were talking about selling her and her brother! Chikisa was only half-conscious. She heard nothing but the hushed words of the two men bargaining. The two Sangal slave merchants in the room consulted with one another in whispers, and finally agreed to accept three silver.

As they made their decision, Chikisa's vision came into focus; he could see the people and objects in the room clearly again. His head felt like it had been split in two. His bloody nose swelled and throbbed as

he sucked in a painful breath. Asra heard his shuddering breaths and turned toward him.

"Chikisa?"

The Yogo merchant grabbed Asra's arm. Asra let out a high-pitched scream like the call of a bird and clung to her brother. "Chikisa! Chikisa!"

Chikisa took Asra's hand and tried to drag her away from the Yogo merchant, but the Rotan merchant kicked him in the gut. He collapsed against the wall.

Something in Asra's chest flipped over and squirmed.

He kicked Chikisa! Asra released a harsh cry from the base of her throat. Fear and hatred simmered within her and boiled over until it threatened to escape the confines of her body in a conflagration of fire. Her feelings could not be contained. They were so hot that they seared her throat.

Asra felt like she was turning away from the darkness to face the light. She felt the emotions within her converge into a shining river that cut through the darkness. The sound of the river got louder and louder, and she felt that it might soon flow out of her, into the outside world.

No one in the room could see it, but Asra's neck was surrounded by a ring of light. Asra could feel it even though she couldn't see it. The ring of light smelled a lot like blood. The scent soaked into her body and wafted through the room.

Guided by the smell of blood, something flowed down the river within Asra.

God! Please save me!

Asra took frantic, shallow breaths and looked up at the man that had kicked Chikisa. Her eyes rolled back in her head. All the blood drained out of Chikisa's face as he gripped Asra in a hard hug. "Stop it, Asra! Don't do it!"

The Yogo slave merchant felt a warm breeze on his face and narrowed his eyes. The next instant, the warm breeze became colder than ice.

***

Balsa stood quietly in the hallway that led up from the dining area into the inn's rooms. The hallway had guardrails to either side. At the very end of the hallway, the inn's paved courtyard was faintly visible below.

Rooms at this inn were small. If she burst into that room now, there would be six people in it. She wasn't used to acting on such a swift impulse, and felt like she was only making problems for herself. She'd been rebuffed by the slavers in the dining area, so she'd followed them to their room, then returned to the room she shared with Tanda to retrieve her spear. Now that she was outside their door, she'd have to move quickly. Once she was in the room, it was possible that one or another of the men would take the children as hostages.

Balsa waited for the moment when the Blue Hand would lead the children out of the room. She heard the stifled sounds of conversation between the slave merchants on the other side of the door. After what felt like a long time, she heard the little girl scream. The boy cried out as well, and Balsa gripped her spear and prepared to fight.

Goosebumps rose along Balsa's arms. She didn't know what she was sensing, but whatever it was got jumbled up with the sound of the girl screaming. Someone collided with the door from the inside; the door came loose from its frame and fell into the hallway.

Blood sprayed from a man's throat all the way up the to the ceiling of the room. Balsa jumped up to the handrail in the hallway and sprang upwards, ducking and dodging as she made her way toward the lower courtyard's garden.

The handrail she'd jumped from vanished as if it had never existed. Balsa felt the weight of someone's huge unseeing eyes upon her, swinging an invisible weapon with wild abandon. If she'd stayed in the hallway, she would have been cut down.

She couldn't see it, but Balsa felt something flying toward her, and dodged narrowly just as it hit. She had no time to think. She let her body move on instinct, and focused only on avoiding the attacks of her invisible enemy. She'd had the tip of an enemy's weapon pointed at her throat countless times before; the experience of combat had soaked into her bones. Those experiences saved her now.

Avoiding the blindingly fast attacks of the unseen scythe rubbed her nerves raw. She was completely out of breath. When she brought her arms up to protect her neck and head, she felt a sensation of sharp cold move up her arms.

It wants to cut my wrists. Balsa dropped her arms away from her face, and the sharp cold feeling shifted to her left side; an instant later the area felt red-hot as the flesh of her stomach was slit open.

Balsa collapsed to the ground and rolled over, back in the direction of the passageway that connected to the inn's main hallway. She felt her attacker following her. It targeted her neck again; she held her hands up over it to protect it and steeled her resolve. She couldn't strike out at it with her spear like she would do with an ordinary enemy.

But before she could work out a strategy, her enemy retreated. Balsa's breathing was ragged. She lowered her arms from her face and realized she was trembling violently. Her teeth chattered. She tried to clamp down on herself and stop shaking but she couldn't stop. Balsa gave herself a tight hug and willed herself to be still.

Balsa had been shaken to the core of herself. That hadn't happened to her since the day she'd made her first kill. She hadn't been able to stop shaking that day, either.

Balsa closed her eyes tightly. She heard Jiguro's voice in her ear, low and reassuring: *Count your breaths. One, two, three...*

By the time she counted eight breaths, she felt herself calming down. The cut to her side throbbed and became increasingly more painful.

She heard footsteps nearby. Someone was in the passageway further down. Balsa ground her teeth and crouched protectively over her wound. She crawled slowly down to the end of the passageway, then stood up.

"Balsa?" Tanda was on the level above her. He leaped over the guardrail and landed with surprising dexterity on the lowest level of the inn where Balsa stood. He ran up to Balsa and supported her as she struggled to remain upright. He was surprised at how cold her hands

were. Her face was drained of blood and covered in a fine sheen of cold sweat.

He noticed the cut to her side immediately, and helped Balsa climb up the path back to their room so that he could treat her. The passageway to and from the courtyard and the hallway of the inn beyond it were crowded with people, but most of them stepped aside and let Balsa pass when they saw her injury.

Balsa felt eyes on her back and turned around. There was no one behind her. *I'm being watched,* she thought, but she didn't know who was doing it. The sensation of being spied on bothered her, but she felt no ill intent in the gaze. Balsa focused on putting one foot in front of the other until she reached her and Tanda's room.

There was a young woman standing in the hall outside the room where the slave merchants had been cut down. She leaned forward, curiously examining the corpses, one of which had spilled out into the hall along with the broken door

.When Balsa looked into the room as she passed, she saw Sufar standing in the very center of it with his back to her. His maro hawk was perched on his shoulder. Balsa put pressure on her wound and approached the doorway.

Sufar turned to look at her. With a severe frown, he pointed to the corpses. "They all had their throats ripped out, exactly like the bodies at Shintadan." Sufar looked straight at Balsa.

Balsa said nothing. She scanned the room until her eyes fell on the two children crouched in a corner. The boy's face was slack with shock. His eyes were firmly shut. The children appeared to be clinging to each other, but on closer inspection it was clear that only the older brother had circled his sister entirely with his arms. He was bent partway over her as if he was trying to protect her--or restrain her.

Balsa saw that the boy's hands were bleeding. She approached the children slowly and crouched down. She reached out tentatively to touch the boy's forehead. The boy opened his eyes and flinched away from her, trying to press himself and his sister into the wall. He sucked

in a huge breath and started shaking all over. His frightened eyes stuck out from his emaciated face so far that they looked like they were about to burst.

The boy kept holding his sister and tried to move away from Balsa along the wall. In his eyes, she saw faint signs of hostility like an echo of what she'd felt from her invisible attacker. The boy set his shoulders and tried to calm himself with his breathing, but he only shook harder. He lost his grip on his sister at the same time that he lost his balance and caught himself on his palms on the floor. Even after he landed, he didn't stop shaking.

Balsa pushed the boy's sweaty hair back from his forehead carefully. She lifted his head gently and held him grounded in place until his breathing evened out and he stopped shaking. It took a long time.

Chapter 3 - Unlucky Children

The wound to Balsa's side closely resembled a bite from a wild animal. Tanda washed it thoroughly with water that he'd dissolved medicinal herbs into, then stitched the deep gash securely closed. Despite this treatment, Balsa soon developed a high fever. He sat by her bed on the floor, monitoring her condition until late in the night.

When Balsa felt her fever rise, she reached out for Tanda's hand.

"What's wrong?" Tanda asked as he took her hand and leaned forward in surprise.

"Are those kids all right?" Balsa whispered hoarsely in his ear.

"Yes, they're fine. Two more herbalists are staying here tonight, and they agreed to help. They finished treating the children a while ago. The injuries to the boy's hand were a lot like yours. He also has a fever."

Balsa squeezed Tanda's hand. "Keep an eye on them. And don't let anyone else in the room with them."

"Huh? Why?"

"I don't...want...anyone to...hear what he says. During his fever."

Tanda nodded in understanding.

Balsa let out a shuddering breath and closed her eyes. She slept until the sun was high the next morning. When she awoke, she was completely disoriented. Everything seemed to spin slowly around her. Tanda helped her eat a thin rice gruel laced with more medicine; she did feel somewhat better after eating it.

"Sufar wanted to ask you something as soon as you felt up to it," Tanda said. "Should I get him?"

Balsa placed her empty bowl on the floor, then sat up against the wall for support. She nodded. Tanda left the room and returned shortly after, leading Sufar.

"Are you all right?" Sufar asked.

"Thanks for your concern, but I'm completely fine."

"I'm glad to hear it. You're clearly stronger than most people." Sufar sat down cross-legged in front of her in the Yogo style. "What happened last night? Is there anything you can tell me?"

Balsa stared at Sufar for a long moment, then said, "I was passing by that room when I heard someone scream. One of the men burst through the door and fell into the hallway, dead. He was bleeding from his throat. I fled to the lower courtyard, but something followed me. It cut my side open."

"What was it? What attacked you?"

Balsa shook her head. "As to that..I'm sorry, but I'm not sure. I know that it attacked me, but you and the kids were the only living beings I saw in that room. I could hear it moving around me like it was alive, but I couldn't see it."

Sufar glanced down at Balsa's wound. "Everyone else that was attacked had their throats ripped out. Why were you alone injured in the side?"

"It was definitely aiming for my neck. When I protected my neck, I felt its intent to get my guard down by attacking my wrists. When I dropped my hands to avoid that attack, it cut me open. Whatever it is, it likes blood. It smelled like...like blood. And death."

"I see," Sufar said. "The neck bleeds a lot when it's cut, because of the large veins and blood vessels concentrated there. So do the wrists, for the same reason. Both places are usually also bare and unprotected by clothing or armor, making them easy to target. But why were you attacked in the first place? And why were you alone spared?"

"No idea."

Sufar narrowed his eyes at Balsa's curt answer. "Why were you carrying your spear in the hallway? You didn't have it at dinner."

Balsa shrugged and didn't say another word.

Sufar stood staring at her for a long moment, but finally muttered, "I hope you recover soon," then left the room.

Tanda had been standing behind Sufar during his conversation with Balsa. His arms were folded across his chest. As the sound of Sufar's footsteps faded, he unfolded his arms and asked, "Why don't you trust Sufar?"

"I'm not sure myself. I just had the strangest feeling... I mean, he was standing right in the middle of the room with those corpses, examining their wounds. If it was you that was there, wouldn't you at least check to make sure the kids were safe and unharmed first? It seemed like he didn't even realize the kids were there." She paused. "And he's wrong. I'm not the only one that survived the attack. Those kids did, too--though I don't know why the attacker hurt the boy like that."

Silver flecks of light speckled Balsa's vision. Loud buzzing sounded irritatingly in her ears. She suddenly felt awful. She crawled back over to her bed and stretched out.

When she looked up, Tanda's face was directly in front of hers. She saw no trace of his usual kind and carefree expression. His eyes were fixed on her with utter seriousness.

Balsa attempted a smile. "I'm all right. The bleeding's stopped."

"That's not what I'm worried about," he said softly. "Like you, I have a strange feeling that something is very wrong here. When I was helping you up yesterday, your hands were cold like ice. I've never seen the expression you had on your face before." He reached out hesitantly and touched Balsa's cheek. His eyes flashed with sudden conviction. In a deadly serious tone, he whispered, "I think it's best if we avoid those two kids."

Balsa's eyes widened at Tanda's unexpected words. "Why?"

"I know you're concerned about them. I am, too. But...well, I'm not much good as a magic weaver, but even I can tell those aren't ordinary kids."

Balsa smiled bitterly. "It just...doesn't seem like you. Are you saying we should abandon them?"

Tanda didn't return the smile. "I think I understand why Sufar didn't notice them. The stench of death covers both of them like a shroud."

Tanda's fingers trembled against her cheek. "I'm scared. I don't know what happened, but those men were killed instantly. Even you were attacked, and you weren't even in the same room. And that girl escaped all of it without so much as a scratch. Compared to your wound, the boy's was much less serious." Tanda took a slow breath. "When I tried to touch the girl's soul, I was shocked. I can't explain in words how horrifying it was. I shudder just remembering it.

"My abilities as a magic weaver are immature at best, but I've seen plenty of cursed people before. I've also seen people that have been possessed by evil spirits. What I felt from that girl's soul is entirely different from either of those. I've never encountered anything like it before. I'm not just worried that something terrible might happen; I *know* it will. That girl is incredibly dangerous.

"I hate to say something so cruel, but those children strike me as something like carriers of a terrible plague. Anyone that stays in contact with them for too long will end up dead." Tanda's words came slower. "So please. Let's not get involved. I don't want to lose you."

Tanda's grave seriousness affected her like a blow to the chest. Balsa reached up and pulled his face close to hers, then kissed him on the cheek close to the side of his mouth. "I won't die so easily," she whispered. "Besides, I'm planning to live at least as long as Torogai."

***

Sufar entered his room at the inn and closed the door behind him. A young woman sitting in the room lifted her head. This was Shihana, Sufar's daughter. She was the same woman that had inspected the bodies of the dead merchants in the room from the hallway the previous night.

Shihana had a slight build, but she was long-limbed and strong. She and Sufar had the same penetrating eyes. Most people would probably consider Shihana's face beautiful, if not for those eyes. Taking her in from a short distance away, her peculiar way of staring through people

and things was readily apparent, and was likely why she made many people uncomfortable.

"What happened to that woman?" she asked.

Sufar sat down on a soft rug on the floor. "I learned nothing from her that we don't already know." He explained what Balsa had told him in plain and simple terms. "Did you learn anything?" he asked.

"The merchants had other friends, but they all fled last night, well before the government officials came to investigate the incident. It seems the merchants were working with the Blue Hand. Everyone knows it's dangerous to associate with them, so the official story is that they got involved in a bit of business that went bad--bad enough to get them killed. All their allies managed to get away; I didn't hear of a single one that's been caught."

Sufar nodded. "I see. Balsa must have known they were with the Blue Hand. She might have encountered them before, given her line of work. That's probably why she was outside their room with her spear."

Sufar remembered how Balsa had cradled the Tal boy's head until he'd calmed down, and his lips twitched upward in a slight smile. "Balsa is dangerous, but unexpectedly soft-hearted. Maybe she saw the children and felt compelled to protect them."

Shihana cast her eyes down and thought through all the details of the situation. She looked up and met Sufar's eyes. "Dad, we should try to bind that girl's soul when she's unconscious--now, while she's still asleep."

Sufar looked at her with a wrinkled brow. "You're as terrifying as that girl for even suggesting such a thing, Shihana."

"We need to hurry. If we wait until she wakes up, we'll lose our chance."

Sufar scratched his beard. "It won't be easy. And if we do it here, Tanda will notice. He'll interfere."

Quietly, dispassionately, Shihana asked, "Why does that matter? The herbalist is essentially powerless."

Sufar's expression became stern. "You're mistaken. Put aside what he appears to be. He has talent as a magic weaver, and his master is the most skilled magic weaver in all of New Yogo. Our ties to that country's magic weavers are weak, but if we killed Tanda to prevent him from interfering--or from talking--it would be the same as declaring war."

Shihana closed her mouth sharply and narrowed her eyes. Sufar noticed her using the thumb and index finger of her left hand to perform delicate circular movements. This was a habit she indulged in whenever she thought deeply about something. She stared into space as if she was absorbed in the spectacle of a tarzu tournament. The game of tarzu was played by the Rota royal family and lords for the purposes of learning military strategy, though other people played, too. Each player had to do their best to read their opponent's moves before they happened in order to stay ahead. There were many moves and combinations of moves available to each player, so every match was unique and complicated.

Shihana was a master of tarzu. She had not lost a single game since she was twenty years old. Sufar had once asked her the secret to her great success at the game. She'd told him in an offhand, careless way, "All you need to do is imagine the shape your victory will take, then guide your opponent into the right position with your own moves. That's all there is to it."

When she'd told him that, Sufar had been surprised--and a little afraid . He'd never forgotten her words. As he watched her deliberate, Sufar listed off other factors that they needed to consider. "Tanda and his friend aren't our only concern. We have no idea what will happen if we use magic on that girl's soul. Until we understand what's at stake, it's too dangerous to even try."

Shihana faced Sufar squarely and nodded as she stood up. "Let's get Mark and the others together. They should be close. If I take a horse I can round a few of them up and be back here in three days." She frowned like she'd just remembered something. "But then I'd be leaving you here alone all that time--is that all right, dad?"

Sufar jutted out his chin and all but pushed her out the door. *Get out of here already.* After she was gone, Sufar unlocked a cabinet in the room that contained some of his magic weaving supplies. He rummaged through the cabinet and retrieved a small bag of purple powder. He picked it up and left his room, intending to pay Asra and Chikisa a visit.

When he arrived at their room, he stood outside and listened for a few moments to make sure they were still asleep. When he slipped into the room, he noticed that the latticed window shutters were closed, and that there were no other light sources. The entire room was reduced to dim shadows.

Sufar directed his nearly silent footfalls toward a small lump of Yogo-style bedding called shilya that was laid out in the corner of the room. He saw the girl lying face-up under her blankets with her eyes closed. The sound of her breathing was so faint it was almost nonexistent.

Her brother was lying on the other side of the room. The sheen of his fever sweat was faintly visible in the dark. He tossed and turned in his sleep. Sufar crossed over to the boy's side of the room and stood by his bedside, then retrieved his pouch of purple powder from his pocket.

Sufar took a pinch of the powder from the pouch and ground it between his fingers. Purple smoke rose in a thin line from his fingers and spread a sweet scent through the room. Sufar muttered something low in his throat, causing the smoke to twist and writhe like a living thing as it settled over the boy's face.

***

Chikisa was dreaming. In his dream, there was a dizzying array of shifting locations: the place he and Asra had stayed with the slave merchants before they died, the slave caravan he and Asra had traveled with on their way to the inn, and the prison before that.

Chikisa's body convulsed in pain. He knew that he was dreaming. He kept trying to wake up, but an unfamiliar voice kept questioning him

about the past and wouldn't let him wake. He resisted the voice's demands and tried to force open his heavy eyelids. After what felt like a long struggle, Chikisa was finally successful. He awoke to find a man sitting next to his bed.

"You're a stubborn one," the man muttered. Chikisa noticed that he was smiling slightly. He got up and left the room without another word.

Chikisa took shallow breaths as he watched the man leave. He was sure the man wasn't a hallucination brought on by his fever. An unusual sweet scent filled the room; he'd never smelled it before.

Who was that? What were they doing?

Chikisa's eyes snapped open, and he quickly turned on his side to check on Asra. She was deeply asleep. He heard the soft sound of the door sliding open and sat up. He thought that maybe the man from before had returned, but it was the healer that had stitched up the gash on Chikisa's hand. He had a kind and gentle way of speaking. Chikisa thought his name was Tanda.

"Is it all right if I come in?" Tanda whispered. "I wanted to check on you."

His Rotan was faltering and slow, but his pronunciation was solid enough for Chikisa to understand what he was saying. He nodded.

Tanda had done his best to approach quietly so he wouldn't wake the children, so he was a little surprised to find Chikisa awake. He frowned a little and asked, "Has someone else been here?"

Chikisa tried to answer, but his throat was so dry and parched that he couldn't get words out.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Tanda said quickly. "Don't force yourself. Here, have something to drink and just relax, all right?" He helped Chikisa sit up fully in bed and coaxed a thick medicinal liquid down his throat slowly, a little at a time. The cool drink soothed and coated Chikisa's fever-parched throat.

As Tanda supported Chikisa's head to help him drink, he noticed the weakness of the boy's neck and shoulder muscles, and his heart ached for him. He'd told Balsa to avoid and maybe even abandon these kids,

and some part of him believed that doing so was still the safest course of action, but he couldn't suppress his pity for them.

Tanda smelled something strange. Chikisa looked up at him and tried to say something, but Tanda didn't quite catch it. He brought his face closer to Chikisa so he could hear better.

"Thank...you," Chikisa choked out. His voice was hoarse and strained, but he could speak.

Tanda smiled. "You're welcome."

"Someone else," Chikisa gasped out, "was here. Sitting by me." His voice got stronger and clearer as he spoke.

Tanda's expression tightened with worry. "Who was it?"

"A man. It was dark. I couldn't see."

"Was he about as tall as me?"

Chikisa thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Shorter."

Probably Sufar, then, Tanda thought. The sweet smell hanging in the air came from grinding up the root of a tree that the Yakoo called tajam. Mixed with the tree's resin, the powdered root could be used by magic weavers to manipulate the dreams of a sleeping person. If the magic weaver was powerful enough, they'd be able to touch the sleeper's soul and share their dream.

"Mr. Tanda?" Chikisa asked.

Hearing his name, Tanda returned his attention to Chikisa. "Yes?"

"Is that woman all right?"

At first Tanda wasn't sure which woman he was talking about, but then Chikisa mimed cutting his side.

"Oh. Yes, she's all right now."

Doubt mixed with worry showed in Chikisa's frown, so Tanda added, "I promise you, she's all right. She's very strong."

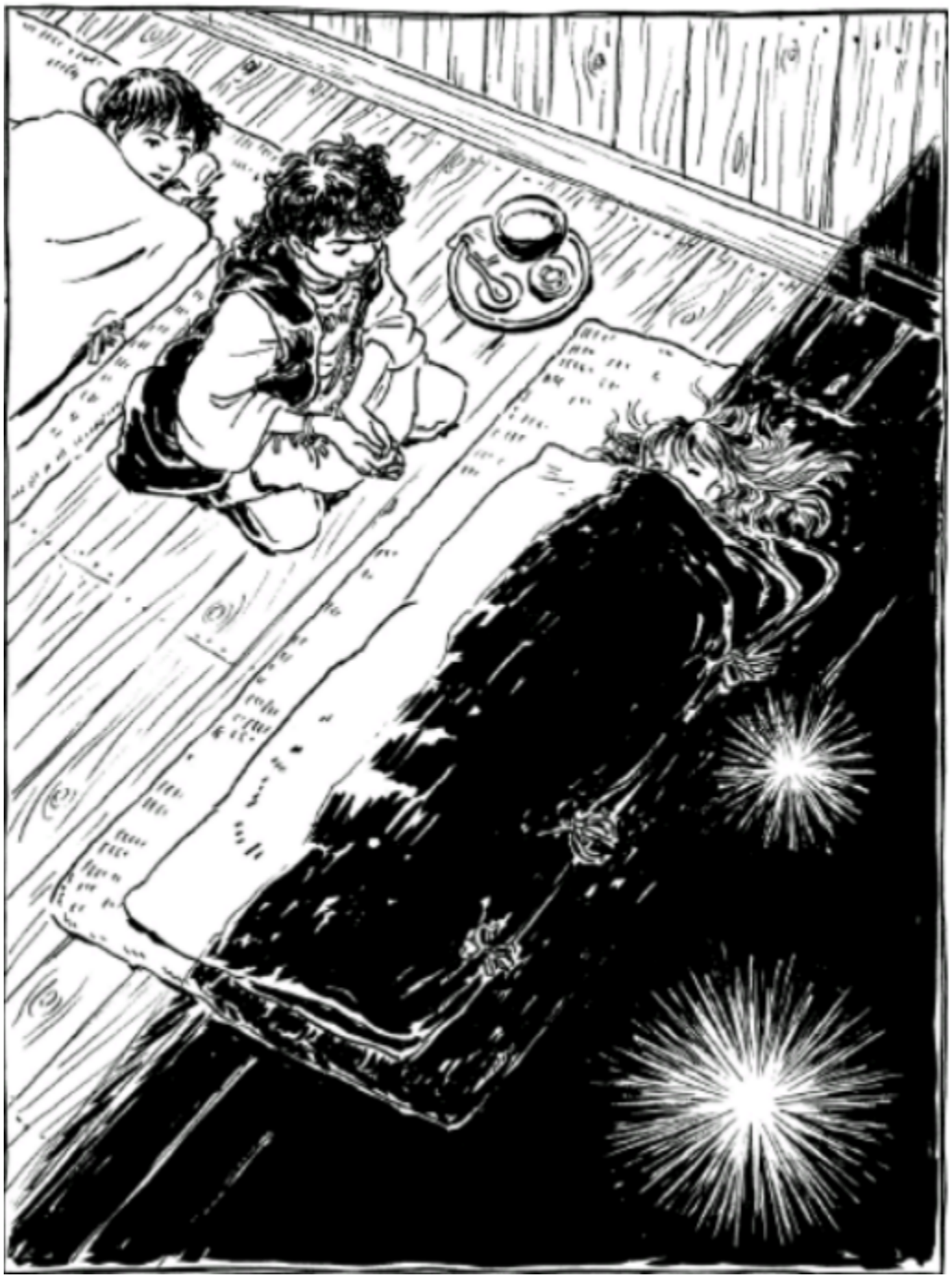
Balsa had trained her body well past the physical limits of most people. She was also used to being injured and recovering. Her fever had already broken. In halting Rotan, Tanda conveyed as much of this as he could to Chikisa to reassure him.

The boy's expression was pinched and nervous when he started listening to Tanda's explanation, but it had cleared by the time Tanda finished speaking. He blinked sleepily up at Tanda, and Tanda helped him lie back down.

Chikisa turned his face toward his sister. It was clear to Tanda that he wanted to reach out to her, but feared waking her if he did. Tanda carefully arranged Chikisa's legs so that they angled toward Asra, so that he could at least watch over her as she slept.

The previous night, Tanda had used magic weaving to attempt to touch the girl's soul. Even remembering the experience made him shudder until he felt like he was turning inside-out. When he'd reached in to touch her soul, the muscles along his spine had frozen solid like they'd been encased in ice. The girl's soul had been covered by a thin barrier like skin. He knew that touching the skin would break the barrier and release what was on the other side.

Tanda had hastily withdrawn the touch of his own soul, feeling a terror strong enough to rip out his heart and shatter his bones as he separated himself from the presence that had lodged itself inside the girl. He feared whatever lurked on the other side of the barrier. The scent it gave off was overpowering and evil. Balsa had described it as the stench of blood and death, but Tanda didn't think that description fully captured it.



He didn't want to touch the girl. He didn't understand how such a girl had come to exist. If she'd simply been cursed, Tanda knew how to break curses. He also knew how to ward against and drive off evil spirits. But what afflicted the girl wasn't either of those things, so he had no idea how to help her. She was incredibly quiet, but he could hear her breathing softly in her sleep. She was definitely still alive, but the

signs of long neglect and undernourishment were plain to see. Tanda didn't know how long it would be safe to let her sleep without eating or drinking anything.

"The last time this happened, she didn't wake up for two days," Chikisa whispered.

Tanda turned to face Chikisa, who regarded him with an expression of fear--and distrust. He'd probably said this to Tanda unthinkingly, out of concern for his sister; perhaps he regretted saying it.

Tanda wanted to ask, "The last time this happened?", but he swallowed down the words before he could say them. Chikisa didn't want him to ask that question. If he put together everything he knew so far, he could try to make a guess as to what must have happened. He didn't want to think about this situation at all, but Sufar seemed to think that these kids had something to do with the Shintadan massacre.

If he asked about that, Tanda was certain that Chikisa would clam up and refuse to speak. Chikisa's trust in him was new and fragile. Besides, Tanda was no skilled interrogator, especially not of children.

"How did she wake up...after that time?" Tanda asked.

Chikisa chose his next words carefully. "I walked with her on my back while she slept. I fell...I was hungry and tired and fell into a ditch. She rolled into the meadow on the side of the road. That's when she woke up."

"How did she feel?"

"Dead tired. She could barely move. I was afraid she might die."

Tanda thought for a moment, then directed his entire attention to Chikisa, because he needed to impress on him the seriousness of what they needed to do. "She needs water, at least. If she doesn't get it soon, she might die. Do you understand?"

Chikisa nodded.

"Is it dangerous to wake her?" Tanda asked.

Chikisa looked up at Tanda with wide-open eyes. Tanda met his eyes and held his stare. Chikisa sighed and shook his head. "No, it's not

dangerous. I'll do it."

Tanda gave Chikisa a hand up and helped him cross the room to his sister's bed. Chikisa touched her hair and said in her ear, "Asra! Asra! It's time to get up! Asra!"

There was no response. Chikisa looked up at Tanda.

"It looks like we have to wait a little longer," Tanda said. "But please call me as soon as she wakes up."

Chikisa nodded. Tanda got to his feet and prepared to leave, but Chikisa called him back before he opened the door. "Mr. Tanda? Um, about the room...and the medicine..." Chikisa's voice trailed off. "We, um, don't have any money."

Tanda's eyebrows shot straight up. He grinned. "Don't worry about it. I'll lend you the money. When you become an adult and get a job, you can pay me back then. Is that fair?"

Chikisa stared intensely at Tanda and lifted his uninjured hand. He placed a finger each on his forehead, nose, and mouth, then removed them and rested his head on the floor. He'd undoubtedly just thanked Tanda in some way, but Tanda had never seen that gesture of thanks before.

Chapter 4 - Short Spear in the Moonlight

Balsa ate well and slept well. On the third night after she'd been injured, she felt well enough to practice with her spear. She got up and went to the inn's garden to train.

Tanda thought her powers of physical recovery were remarkable for someone of her age. She was like a wild animal that could be killed by its environment at the first sign of weakness or sickness. In such an environment, recovery speed would determine whether the animal lived or died. When Tanda was injured or sick himself, he usually wanted some kind of sympathy or compassion as healed, but not Balsa. She couldn't permit herself to behave in such a way; she'd probably turn to stone before she asked for sympathy. In her times of greatest weakness, she took her heart and locked it somewhere far away. Jiguro had made her into something wild and independent that could survive anything alone.

Chikisa was also recovering remarkably well, given his injuries and his general weakness from near-starvation. Tanda knew that children from impoverished families were usually hardier than children raised in the homes of rich merchants and lords, but Chikisa's rate of recovery rivaled Balsa's. Their minds seemed to be rushing their bodies along: *Get well fast so you can move.*

Asra had awakened the morning after Tanda and Chikisa had spoken. She'd been groggy and disoriented at first, but by noon she'd been able to help Chikisa sit up in bed, and to clean herself up after her long sleep. She ate and walked around a little, slowly making progress each day.

Tanda spoke to the workers at the inn and asked them to tell Tanda if Asra or Chikisa's health worsened, but otherwise let the inn's staff take care of the children. He did feel somewhat guilty about this, so he continued to make and bring food for them every day. They ate his food

eagerly, and he watched over them until they finished, offering them his silent apology for all the things he couldn't do for them.

He hoped Asra and Chikisa would continue to recover quickly, before he became more attached to them. He still wanted to part from them at the earliest opportunity, but no matter how terrifying they were, he couldn't bring himself to abandon two children that were barely strong enough to sit up in bed. Tanda recognized this as a sort of weakness in himself.

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After dinner, Asra and Chikisa each laid down on opposite sides of a brazier in their room. They drowsed for a while, half-asleep, until a strange noise awakened them. It was a high sound like a whip cutting through the air, coming from the direction of the garden. Asra opened her eyes and looked at Chikisa.

"What's that?"

"I don't know. It sounds like an apprentice horse driver learning how to use a whip."

"But I don't hear the sound of the whip recoiling," Asra said. "It's just cutting."

Chikisa got up, holding his blankets around his shoulders as he moved. He lifted the blinds of the window and peeked into the garden. Asra stood beside him and looked out.

The garden was lit only by the dim light of the moon, so at first all they could see was something small and sharp flashing as it cut through the air. Whatever it was left a bright afterimage as it moved at dizzying speed. It was the tip of Balsa's spear, reflecting the moonlight as she trained.

Stunned at the speed and grace of such movements, neither Chikisa nor Asra said anything for a long while. They stood and stared at the point of dancing light as their eyes adjusted to the darkness. Eventually,

they could make out the shadow of a person moving, and Chikisa said, "Ah! It's her!"

"Huh?" Asra asked.

Chikisa seemed reluctant to speak, but after a moment he whispered, "She was in the hallway outside the door when those men were killed. She was hurt. Her name is Balsa."

Asra frowned and said, "I remember. Why did you tell me ‘no?' Why did you say I shouldn't summon the god?"

Chikisa gave Asra a sullen look, but Asra's frown as she looked at Balsa did not shift. She was clearly not in the mood for excuses or complaints, but answers.

Chikisa relaxed his shoulders. "Let's put that aside for now. That woman, Balsa, was attacked by the god, but she wasn't killed. She probably moved fast enough to save herself."

Asra shook her head. "It doesn't matter how fast someone moves. The god can always catch them. The god didn't kill her because she's not a bad person."

Asra's expression was solemn like a priest's while performing sacred rites. Chikisa saw no trace of his kind and timid little sister in her anywhere. His heart hurt. He bit his lip. Asra worshiped the thing that lived inside her as a kind and just god. That god was called Talhamaya.

Talhamaya was a god born of Afal, the Tal god of blessings, but Talhamaya bore no resemblance whatsoever to her benevolent parent. Her nature was essentially cruel. Chikisa and Asra's mother had served the Tal Kumada, who were called the Shadow Priests by the people of Rota. But their mother had gone against the Tal Kumada's teachings. She'd believed that Talhamaya's terrible power could be harnessed and used to restore the Tal people to their former glory.

But Chikisa had witnessed the massacre at Shintadan prison. He knew that the Shadow Priests had been right, and his mother had been wrong.

When his mother had been executed, the men and women surrounding her had laughed, and Chikisa had hated them. He would have cut them all down himself if he could have. But the thing that had emerged from Asra had been like an unstoppable storm cutting down every tree in its path. It had killed everyone.

Chikisa didn't believe that a god would do something like that. Whatever he'd seen had no capacity for pity or compassion. The god was nothing but a heartless and cruel expression of raw power.

But Asra had never doubted the god, not even once. She'd believed their mother when she'd told them that Talhamaya was sacred and holy. That belief was a shield that protected Asra's heart. Chikisa thought that if she ever did start to doubt the god, she'd go insane. He could do nothing but feel sorry for her as she imitated the lofty attitude and actions of the holy priests of the god. She was acting like their mother--but it was only an act.

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"I'm sure she's a good person. That's why the god didn't kill her," Asra repeated in an attempt to reassure herself. "She must be."

"She's definitely good," Chikisa said. "When I was hurt, she hugged me and helped me calm down."

Asra looked at Chikisa in surprise. She couldn't believe that a complete stranger had hugged Chikisa.

"It's true," Chikisa said.

Asra blinked and frowned a little. "Really?" she asked. She seemed to be looking for the lie in her brother's words. "But she's not hurt at all. Shouldn't she be resting like you?"

Chikisa also thought that was a bit strange. He remembered blood gushing from her left side on the night of the attack, and it had only been three days since then. How could she move like that?

The two of them watched Balsa training in the garden. They hadn't noticed before, but she really did seem to be favoring her left side. Movements made with her right side were perfect and precise, but movements moved with her left side were obviously slower. They saw her supporting her spear with her elbow when it crossed to the left side. Her elbow kept her spear fixed to her side above the site of her injury and held it there as she performed her training.

"So it *is* true!" Asra said. Her voice was soft, but her tone was bright. Chikisa smiled. He hadn't heard her sound like that in a long time. He felt like they'd been been wandering alone in the cold dark for weeks. Even before they'd arrived at this inn, there had been so much darkness in front of Chikisa that he hadn't been able to see a path forward. When the god had killed all those people, all he'd been able to think about was staying alive.

As Asra watched Balsa outside the window, Chikisa felt like he'd gotten his little sister back. This warm, brief moment shone like a tiny lamp in the darkness of Chikisa's heart. At the same time, he realized that this moment wouldn't last. Asra was never going to be her normal self again. He felt the sudden need to talk to her, as if he might never get another chance.

"Hey, Asra. Can we talk a little?" he asked. Chikisa took Asra's cold hand in his own uninjured hand and squeezed. Asra squeezed back. "I've been thinking about what we should do now. We have no money. Someone bad might catch us again. I don't know what will happen to us then."

"Don't worry about us, Chikisa! We'll be fine. The god is with us. Even if bad people find us again, the god will protect us for sure." Her eyes shone bright with conviction.

Chikisa hesitated, then said the thing he knew he had to say, even though he really didn't want to. "Asra...I never want to see the god again." His voice caught in his hoarse, dry throat as he spoke. Hearing his pained voice, Asra turned toward him and frowned deeply. Chikisa

said hurriedly, "You haven't seen it. Have you? You haven't seen what happens when the god comes."

Asra blinked. It was true that when she called the god, she never saw what happened immediately after. But calling the god felt good. All her feelings of rage or fear melted away in an instant when she invited the god in, and she was filled with an incredible sense of peace and comfort. And when she came back to herself, the bad people were always gone.

Chikisa's emotions could not be easily expressed in words. He let go of Asra's hand and started untying the bandage on his right hand. He undid the knots in a hurry, ripped away the clasp, and pulled the cloth from his wound so fast that blood and scabs came with it. He held out his injured hand to Asra. The thing inside Asra could probably see it, too. He could be killed later for doing this.

Why should I care? Chikisa thought.

"Look at this, Asra. Your god did this. It hurt me. The second after you summoned it, it did this." Chikisa fought to keep his voice under control so it wouldn't crack. "The other people in that room had their throats ripped out. I saw their necks cut open. I saw them bleed to death."

Asra stared at Chikisa's injured hand as if it wasn't real. There was a long gash along his palm, running down between the space between his index finger and thumb. The wound had been sewn closed. The stitches holding it together were black with dried blood.

Asra's lips trembled. Her sacred mask fell away, and the face of the little sister Chikisa remembered peeked out from underneath. "Chikisa, I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know. I thought those men hurt you."

Tears welled up in Asra's eyes. Chikisa reached out without thinking and held her face in his hands. "I'm sure your god saved us, and I'm grateful for that. But try to understand why I don't want to see it anymore. So many people, bleeding to death like that..." He trailed off, but kept his hands on Asra's face. "The god has appeared twice. Both

times, we were in danger. You were so scared, and got so angry you lost your senses. Isn't that right?"

Asra gave him a slight nod. Remembering those experiences made her uncomfortable and shy, like a fish concealing itself in the shallow waters of a marsh, darting away as soon as anyone tried to catch her. Unlike Chikisa, she remembered very little of what had happened at Shintadan. She did remember the heartbreaking pain she'd felt at her mother's execution, and she knew now that it would never really go away. That moment would be stamped on her heart forever.

At Shintadan, she'd suffered so much that it felt like her body was being torn apart. She remembered looking at all the people around her in the prison yard and wanting them to disappear. She'd heard the sacred river flowing within herself, loud and getting louder until its sound echoed through her entire body. She'd known that if she followed the flow of the river, the god would grant her wish. She had no memories of that day after that moment.

Had the god really slit the throats of all those people? She had trouble imagining it. Blood soaking into the ground from their wounds...eyes vacant and dead...when she thought about it, her head felt numb, tingly and cold.

"It's just the two of us now," Chikisa said. "We have no money, and no parents. Up until now, we've had a string of pretty terrible experiences. But--well, what do you intend to do now? Will you summon the god to kill people every time we're in trouble?" Chikisa's heart beat faster. "How many people will you kill to save us?"

Asra's heart sank in her chest. She shook her head in fierce denial. "I won't do that! I won't kill people like that--the god only kills bad people!"

"But even bystanders are injured! Just like me!"

Asra shook her head again, and Chikisa said to her plainly and directly: "Listen, Asra. We need to find a way to live, and live better. We can't keep surviving by harming others just because they bully us or look down on us. You can't keep calling the god. All it does is kill people.

We need to grow up, find work, and make a life for ourselves just like everyone else."

Asra nodded slowly. "But how will we do that?"

"I don't know if it'll work out, but I've been thinking about it. It might be impossible, but..." Chikisa told Asra his plan. Asra listened in silence, and blood slowly returned to her pale face as he spoke. She thought it was a really good plan. He looked a lot like their father as he laid everything out for her, determined and brave.

"I think it will work," Asra said.

They heard someone moving on the other side of the door. "Excuse me. I have some medicine to deliver. May I come in?" Toma asked. She was one of the workers at the inn that often brought them their food.

Chikisa crossed the room and opened the door. Toma entered the room carrying a steaming tray of liquid medicine. "Please drink this. But be careful--it's still hot." She set down the tray and poured out two cups of hot liquid. "When you're done, please put the cups back on the tray, then place the tray in the hall. I hope you sleep well." Toma checked that there were enough coals left in the room's brazier, then left the room.

Chikisa and Asra blew on their cups to cool down the medicine enough for them to drink it. Asra frowned slightly as she tasted it. Chikisa took only a single swallow of the medicine before putting his cup aside.

"Chikisa, don't we have to drink it?" Asra asked.

"I don't need it. I'll be all right after a little more sleep." Chikisa smiled, stood up, and dumped his remaining medicine out the window.

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As Toma prepared to return to the kitchen, someone called out to her from behind. "Ah! Hello, Sufar. I just delivered the medicine you gave me to the children."

"Thank you," Sufar said.

"It was my pleasure. You and Tanda are wonderful people. You've taken such good care of those two, even though they're complete strangers to you. I've never seen anything like it. Those kids are really lucky."

Sufar put his hand over his face in embarrassment. "Those children are both bright and well-behaved. I've been thinking about taking them on and giving them a place to stay, at least for a while. If they're feeling better, we might leave the inn together tomorrow. Is my room all paid for?"

"Yes, yes, you've paid more than enough. I hope to see you here again soon, Sufar."

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Tanda read a scroll while sitting beneath a dim lamp at his desk in the room he shared with Balsa. He'd just started reading it that day. It was written in Rotan, and listed medicinal ingredients and techniques that Rotan herbalists used in healing. The quality of the paper it was written on was poor, but the scroll's contents were fascinating. He loved coming to the Herb Market for many reasons, but one of them was that he was able to buy scrolls like this.

He heard footsteps outside the door and lifted his head. He thought that maybe Balsa had returned, but whoever he was hearing wasn't Balsa; their gait was too different, and they made too much noise.

"It's Sufar. May I come in?"

Tanda opened the door and let Sufar in. Sufar glanced at the open scroll Tanda had been reading and smiled. "Ah, Shaltom's medicinal guide. I have a copy of it, myself."

"It helps me to understand the properties of the medicinal plants in Rota in a way I never could before. It's so interesting! Rota and New Yogo are neighbors, but the fauna in northern Rota closely resembles that of Kanbal."

Sufar nodded. "If you compare the Nayoro Peninsula with Rota, you'll notice that the climate is much wetter in New Yogo. Of course, southern Rota is just as wet in some places, but the north is far removed from any large water source, and the flatlands are covered in deep forests and lush grasslands. It's very true that the north resembles Kanbal a good deal."

Sufar shifted his gaze from the medicinal guide to Tanda. "You've certainly given your all in caring for those children."

"Well, I am an herbalist."

Sufar smiled. "Of course. I almost forgot that you save injured people's lives for a living."

Tanda frowned a little. "What are you trying to say, Sufar?"

Sufar's smile vanished. "Have you ever heard of the Tal people?"

"Yes. I've heard a little about them from Balsa. They live secretly in Rota's forests and avoid contact with other Rotan people. I've also heard that they're tall, lithe, and a good-looking people, but other Rotans go out of their way to avoid them."

Sfal's lips twitched downward in a frown. "You're unusually fair-minded for a foreigner. I'm surprised that you knew all that and still decided to help those children. It's clear that you pity them. It's written all over your face."

Tanda glared at Sufar. "Is there any reason that I shouldn't?"

Sufar sighed. "I want you to understand that you're in an untenable situation. That's why I came tonight." Sufar leaned forward and said in a whisper, "You may have guessed this already, but those children are Tal people. On the outside, Tal people appear beautiful, but this is a trap for the unwary. There are hardly any mixed marriages between Tal people and the other people of Rota, as is evident in the current clear divide between our races. This divide is not only reflected in our appearances, but our capabilities. Like water flowing downstream, the Tal people have passed a strange power down through the generations."

"A strange power? Is it like magic weaving?"

"No. This power gives its wielder the ability to see another world, one that ordinary people can't see. Unlike magic weaving, wielders of this power are always able to see this world, without needing to perform any preparations or undergo any training. They can also touch and manipulate elements of that other world.

"It is true that we magic weavers can do much the same thing with preparation and effort, but we also cannot see the other world for very long. The power I'm referring to comes to its wielder naturally, through genetic inheritance."

"That's...interesting," Tanda said. "When Crown Prince Chagum hosted the egg of the water spirit, I think he could see Nayugu in a way similar to what you're describing. So it does seem that some people are born with that power."

Sufar's frown deepened. "'Interesting' doesn't even begin to cover it," he said harshly. "A child born with this power has the potential to cause a terrible disaster. There are times when the other world brings blessings to our own, but the other world also contains terrifying beings that we do not understand. If the ignorant disturb them without thinking, we have no way of knowing what could happen."

Tanda knew where this conversation was going. Sufar continued with a note of desperation in his tone: "The fact that they are children blinds others to the fact that they are tools--vessels for this terrible power I have spoken of. Do you understand, Tanda? If you could see their true faces, you'd never dream of helping them. An evil spirit has possessed that little girl."

Tanda stared at Sufar. "You may be right, but the role of magic weavers is to drive away evil spirits, isn't it? Unless...is this spirit so powerful that attempting to repel it would kill the child?"

Sufar's eyes showed pain and sorrow plainly as he shook his head up and down once. "That is indeed the case. If we were dealing with an ordinary evil spirit, we magic weavers would do everything in our power to save the poor girl. But there is no way to save her. We have no

choice--we must avert a worse disaster than has already occurred. The girl cannot be allowed to live."

Tanda heard footsteps in the hall outside the room. Balsa had returned. Sufar heard her returning as well and stood up straight, regarding Tanda with a grave expression. "Tanda. I always want us to be good friends. Please believe me when I say that this is something that must be done."

Sufar opened the door to the hall and left, passing by Balsa on his way down the hall. Balsa entered the room. Her hair was damp from recent washing, and the good clean smell of the hot springs clung to her skin. She placed her spear in the corner of the room and asked Tanda, "What did Sufar want?"

Tanda folded his arms, looked up at Balsa, and told her everything Sufar had said. Balsa dried her hair with a bit of dry cloth as she listened.

"Sounds like he was warning you not to interfere," Balsa said. "He seems to think we don't know everything."

"It seems that way."

Balsa folded up the cloth she'd used to dry her hair and said, "I heard that Sufar is leaving tomorrow."

"Huh? Where'd you hear that?"

"I passed by Toma on my way back from the hot springs and talked to her. She thinks you and Sufar are friends, so she told me. She was impressed that you and Sufar are taking care of kids that you don't even know. Sufar said he was going to take the kids with him when he left." Balsa smiled a little.

"What are you smiling for?" Tanda asked. "There's nothing to smile about. I think Sufar is planning to kill them. If he needs to kill the girl to prevent a greater disaster, I'm sure he won't hesitate to kill the boy to keep his actions secret. I thought he felt as sorry for them as we did, but apparently he thinks the best outcome for everyone involved is to kill them."

"Do you think Sufar is right?" Balsa asked. "Will disaster spread over the land if Asra isn't killed?"

Tanda's expression darkened. "I believe that he believes it. And there's probably at least a grain of truth in what he said. He's not the kind of person that would kill children without a reason. I don't want to sit back and watch them die--but I also don't know for sure that I'm in the right and Sufar's not. There's too much I don't know." Tanda paused. "If I made a decision right now, I'd have no way to know if it was wrong or right."

Balsa stared straight at Tanda. "All right. We can ignore what Sufar said for now, then. He probably knows about as much as you, which means he doesn't know enough to make the right decision, either."

Tanda looked at Balsa with a little frown. "What are you saying we should do?"

Balsa sighed. "No matter how much we find out, the essential choice is the same: to kill the kids, or not to kill the kids. That's it, right? Of course we'd never kill them directly, but abandoning them to die would amount to the same thing."

Tanda stayed silent for a while, and finally muttered, "If Sufar's fears are justified, that girl is going to kill a lot of people and cause some kind of terrible calamity. If that's what she does, we'll be saving a mass

murderer by helping her. The people she might kill have just as much of a right to live as she does."

"So you think she should be killed now?" Balsa asked with a sardonic smile.

"You're asking me if it's better to kill the seed of a catastrophe before it sprouts? I hate thinking through philosophical ethics like that." He took a deep breath and looked at Balsa. She was still smiling, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. He felt controlled rage radiating off of her in waves.

"You're thinking like a stray dog, killing a flea before it can bite you. An infected animal is often put down before its infection can spread to people. You're considering the good of the many over the individual; I understand that. But have you given any thought at all to how those kids might survive this?"

"Stop it, Balsa."

Balsa was clearly thinking about Chikisa and Asra's childhood experiences in the same context as her own. Tanda understood that line of reasoning, but this kind of decision couldn't be made emotionally. "I know that all of this goes right to your heart," Tanda said. "What does it mean to save a stranger? What does it mean to be saved by one?

"But this isn't just a simple bodyguarding mission. If things go badly, it'll affect the rest of your life. And even if things go well, you might be throwing the rest of your life away."

Balsa rubbed her chin with her left hand and nodded. "You're right. There are only so many resources that a person can give to someone else. The more they spend without holding something back for themselves, the emptier they become. You want me to take a step back from this so that I don't become empty."

Balsa's tone mixed anguish and anger. A strange light shone from her eyes. Hair that she usually wore up hung free around her shoulders. The shadow of her damp hair moved over her forehead. "When your heart's set on something, you don't care how much it costs you."

Balsa looked at her spear standing in the corner of the room. Oil from her hands had soaked into its shaft over the years, making it gleam in the low light. Jiguro had given it to her when she was ten years old. It had been at her side ever since.

She stared at her spear for a while, then slowly returned her gaze to Tanda.

Chapter 5 - Into Darkness

A little after midnight, three people on horseback entered the back gate of the inn where Balsa and Tanda were staying. The riders paid off the sleepy-looking boy watching the gate and headed for one of the barns in the lower courtyard.

The riders had come a long way. Their horses steamed and sweated as the riders dismounted. They led the horses into the barn. The horses' mouths were all white with foam.

After tying up their horses in the barn, the riders brought in food and water for them, then removed their saddles and tack. They wiped down the horses and brushed them until they were clean. But as soon as their sweat was mostly dry, the riders placed new blankets over their horses' backs and put on their saddles and tack again so they'd be ready to ride at a moment's notice. The horses were shy of fire, so they couldn't bring lights inside. The riders were very accustomed to taking care of their mounts, and managed to perform all of these tasks in total darkness. When they finished with the horses, they entered the inn.

One of the riders was a woman--Shihana, Sufar's daughter. She'd used the fastest route to track down two magic weaver allies from Makal fortress, Mark and Kahal, and they'd all ridden as fast as they could for the inn. When they went inside, they were observed by something on the roof--a little monkey with a bit of red cloth tied around its neck. The monkey had been sitting at the entrance to the inn three days ago, and had allowed Tanda to pet him.

The monkey waited for a while in silence after the riders entered the inn, then slid nimbly off the roof and headed for the inn's kitchen. He glanced around to make sure no one was around, then climbed the roof of the kitchen and slipped through a small chimney hole.

When the kitchen was cleaned after dinner each evening, all five cooking fires were banked in preparation for the next day, so the room

was cool when the monkey entered. The monkey faced one of the fires with a fire poker and started scraping at the ashes at the bottom of the fire pit. Mixed in with the ashes were fresh coals that would be used to quickly light the fire again in the morning.

Hot coals rolled out from the ashes. One of them escaped the fire pit and rolled onto the floor of the kitchen, where it glowed bright red. The monkey put down the fire poker and meandered toward the western wall of the kitchen in the direction of a large earthenware pot. The monkey scrunched his tiny body between the wall and the pot, then kicked at the wall. The earthenware pot toppled over, spilling oil all over the floor.

The monkey jumped agilely away from the spill and climbed up onto the kitchen's shelves. He watched the spreading oil get closer and closer to the glowing red coal. The oil flowed underneath the coal and ignited with a loud pop, and soon the entire floor was a sheet of flames.

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Chikisa groaned as he opened his eyes. He was drenched in sweat, and felt so thirsty he couldn't stand it. He tried to reach for the clay jar of water beside him, but found himself completely unable to move. His entire body felt weak and drained of energy. As his head gradually cleared, he remembered taking a sip of the medicine that Toma had brought.

Had the medicine done this? That was all he could think about. That medicine had tasted so strange...

"A....Asra..." He called out his sister's name and tried to shake himself into movement. Asra didn't wake. Terror seized Chikisa like the talons of an eagle enclosing his heart. Chikisa had drunk only a little bit of the medicine, but Asra had drunk it all. If it was poison and not medicine, Asra might already be dead.

Chikisa shook violently, thrashing his limbs as he tried to get to closer to Asra. With a great deal of effort, Chikisa managed to bring his

ear close enough to touch Asra's nose where she laid sleeping on her side. Chikisa held his breath and waited.

After a long moment, Chikisa felt Asra's breath ghost across the shell of his ear. The medicine they'd been given was only meant to make them sleep. Chikisa collapsed bonelessly, completely spent from the exertion of crossing the room. He took shallow, panting breaths and tried to figure out *why*.

Why had they been given sleeping medicine? Who had prepared it for them? Could Tanda have done it? His name was the first one that popped into Chikisa's head. He didn't want to believe that Tanda had done it, but it seemed likely that he had. But when he thought about the whole situation from beginning to end, he realized that Tanda had never before sent anyone else to deliver medicine. He always came himself. Had Toma said that she'd gotten the medicine from Tanda? He didn't think so. But if Tanda hadn't sent it, who had?

Chikisa remembered the horrible nightmare he'd had a few nights ago. The room had smelled strange and sweet, and he'd seen the shadow of someone peeking into his dream. A shock went through his whole body. Someone intended to hurt him and Asra. If they stayed here until dawn, he didn't know what would happen to them. He had to find a way to save them. His body was entirely numb, but terror gave him the strength to walk, maybe. If his life depended on it.

Chikisa stood up slowly, took a few faltering steps forward, and stumbled out the door into the hallway.

"Huh. So you didn't drink it," a man's voice whispered to him from behind. Chikisa was startled. He placed his hands on the wall for support and shifted around to see who'd spoken. He saw the long shadow of the man sitting still at the end of the hall, just a little ways away. He was vaguely familiar, with a slight build and eyes that glowed like coals as they tracked Chikisa's every move.

"I'm sorry," the man said. "It's not personal. It's fate." The man stood up in a fluid motion and grabbed Chikisa's arm. He reeled him in close

and punched him solidly in the stomach. Chikisa struggled to stay upright as he felt the next blow coming, then passed out.

Sufar lifted Chikisa's unconscious body up lightly over his shoulders. He carried him back into the room where Asra still slept and laid him out on the floor. He frowned down at Asra.

Shihana called out to him from the direction of the hallway. "Dad." She was standing in the hallway one level above, dressed in traveling clothes. She vaulted the handrail of the level of above and landed in the lower courtyard of the inn, then ascended the ramp into the hallway that connected the inn's rooms on its lowest level. She stood in the doorway of Asra and Chikisa's room and looked at Sufar.

"What's wrong?" Sufar whispered. "I thought you intended to rest a little longer."

Shihana shook her head and frowned severely. All in a rush, she said, "Can't you feel it? The inn's on fire. Something's burning."

Sufar stepped out of the room and scented the air. "Yes...now that you mention it, I smell smoke."

"I have a bad feeling about all this," Shihana said. "I want to leave as soon as possible."

"But didn't you just get here? The horses must be exhausted."

"They'll be fine. We'll get away tonight, then take a rest at the nearest town. The horses can rest then, too."

Sufar nodded slowly. "All right. You take the girl and go ahead of me. I'll bring the boy. I need to pack up everything in my room, but I'll meet you at the barn shortly."

Sufar and Shihana picked up Chikisa and Asra respectively, and carried them piggyback-style. They sneaked into the hallway without making a sound, then walked off in opposite directions down the hallway.

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Balsa didn't say a word after making her decision. She suddenly felt restless and started preparing her traveling clothes. Tanda watched her and felt like they were falling into some kind of deep and inescapable pattern. After a while, he started preparing his own traveling clothes as well--but he hadn't made up his mind yet.

Even if what Sufar said about Asra and Chikisa was true, Tanda didn't have it in him to abandon them. His judgment could be mistaken, though. What he really wanted was time: time to gather information and see all sides of the situation clearly.

Just as he and Balsa finished their preparations, they heard the sound of an alarm bell. There were two long tolls followed by one shorter pull in a repeated pattern, indicating that there was a fire at the inn.

Tanda pulled open the door and dashed into the hallway. Other guests of the inn spilled into the hallway from all sides. Tanda clearly smelled smoke wafting through the air.

"Fire! The kitchen is on fire!" someone shouted. The speaker wasn't visible; the voice came from the direction of the inn's lower courtyard where the kitchen and dining areas were. A sudden loud sound startled Tanda. He turned toward it, and saw Balsa punching out the window blinds of their room with the tip of her spear. She poked at all four corners of each slatted blind first, then pushed them out of their moorings with the palm of her hand. The broken blinds fell into the courtyard below.

"What are you doing?" Tanda asked.

Balsa didn't answer. She walked over to him quickly, wrapped her left arm around his neck, and pulled him into a fierce hug. She pulled back, and their eyes met for a brief moment. Then Balsa spun around, sprinted back into the room, and leaped out the window she'd removed the blinds from.

Tanda ran over to the window in a rush and leaned out of the frame. He could just make out Balsa's shadowy figure running in the direction

of the barn at the edge of the lower courtyard. Seconds later, she was swallowed up by the darkness.

For a brief, insane moment, Tanda considered jumping out the window himself and chasing after her, but then he thought better of it. He dashed back out into the hallway, pushing people out of the way as he ran as fast as he could to Asra and Chikisa's room. When he finally reached their room and looked in, all he saw was two sets of empty bedding on the floor. There was no sign of Asra or Chikisa anywhere.

The smell of smoke was getting stronger. Tanda broke through the blinds of the room with his fists and slipped out the window into the lower courtyard.

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When Shihana heard the alarm bell signaling a fire, she'd only just left the lower courtyard of the inn. Asra was asleep on her back and showed no signs of waking at the sound of the alarm. Shihana shifted Asra higher on her back and headed to the barn with the horses. The moon had already set, but the fire from the kitchen bathed the entire area in soft reddish light, so the outlines of the barn were visible. Smoke streaked through the air.

As Shihana entered the barn, the horses tracked her warily with the whites of their eyes and neighed in agitation as they stomped their hooves. Shihana was used to calming spooked horses, but she needed her hands to do it, and her hands were full with Asra. She smacked her lips together and laid Asra out on the ground in the barn. She approached her own horse, speaking in a soothing tone as she untied it and freed its reins. When the horse was ready to ride, she returned her attention to Asra.

She settled the girl's limbs over her back and hips again, then took a strip of leather, wound it around Asra's back, and tied it around her own stomach. She took the remaining long ends of the strap and tied Asra's hands together.

As she turned back to her horse, she saw the shadow of something moving outside the barn. She left the barn, moving reflexively toward the shadow as she unsheathed her short sword from the scabbard at her belt in preparation. She felt a rush of air along her side and moved on reflex; the next moment, she saw that the leather strap binding Asra to her had been cut. Asra fell to the ground.

There was another rush of air, and Shihana felt something aiming for her chin. She barely managed to avoid the attack. She took a step backward and tried to reclaim Asra, but tripped over her and fell face-up onto the ground.

She jumped instantly to her feet and felt a kick slam hard into her left ear. She blinked, struggling to remain conscious, then blacked out.

Shihana fell to earth like a tree that had been chopped down. Balsa stabbed her spear point into the ground. She shifted the straps of her traveling pack so that she was carrying it on her stomach, then picked up Asra piggyback-style. She placed Asra's legs through the straps of her pack along with her own arms, then undid the bindings around Asra's wrists and retied them so that Asra's hands wound around her neck. She didn't want Asra to fall.

Balsa picked up her spear with her right hand and entered the barn. Shihana's horse, saddled and ready to ride, stood directly in front of her. The horse was over-excited, snorting and showing its teeth. It looked at Balsa with a wariness that was easily discerned even in the darkness. As Balsa and the horse stared at one another, the horse took a step back. There was a sound like the buzzing of a horsefly; a moment later, the entire barn went up in flames.

The fire surrounded Balsa, following her as if it had a will of its own. The horse neighed shrilly and reared, trying to drive Balsa away. Balsa seized the horse's reins and encouraged it to move forward with commands given in a low, calm tone. She brought her right hand, which was still holding her spear, over her face.

Something pierced her stomach. She glanced down and saw a short sword sticking out of her damaged side. The short sword withdrew

quickly and attacked again, cutting the air in sharp straight lines.

Balsa deflected these attacks with her spear, but she was surrounded by fire on all sides, which hampered her ability to move. She could barely see anything. If the short sword wielder aimed for her back, Asra could be killed. The horse in front of her tossed its head from side to side. She was holding the horse's reins in her left hand, so its forceful, jerky movements sent sharp pain coursing through her injured side.

Balsa dropped the horse's reins and gasped. Fire writhed and twisted around her. The hot air made it difficult for her to breathe, and her vision was clouded by a sort of red haze.

A cold gust of wind passed over Balsa's face, moving as fast as an arrow in flight. The wind broke through the flames surrounding her, and it suddenly became much easier to breathe. Balsa blinked in confusion. What had just happened?

Tanda stood in front of her. She saw the flames surrounding him and tried to call out a warning.

"Don't worry about me," Tanda said. "The fire is an illusion." He reached up and touched her forehead. The fire surrounding them retreated and faded to the corners of the barn; Balsa could see clearly again. With his free hand, Tanda took the horse's reins and untangled them before returning them to Balsa.

Balsa snatched the reins and mounted the horse in a single bound. She gripped the horse's back between her knees and flicked the reins. "Go!" The horse leaped over the remaining illusory flames out of the barn.

Just outside, Balsa saw three figures lined up in front of her. She galloped directly toward them and watched them scatter, but one couldn't get out of the way in time and fell to the ground under the force of Balsa's charge.

She heard Tanda and Sufar fighting behind her, but she couldn't go back now. If she did, she'd be wasting the chance that Tanda had given her. Her heart was torn. To comfort her internal anguish, she told herself, *They won't kill Tanda. They* **won't.**

If she managed to get safely away with Asra, Tanda would be a valuable hostage. She expected Sufar to think along those lines. She forced herself to go against her feelings and kept moving forward. With Asra on her back, she galloped headlong into darkness.

Part Two

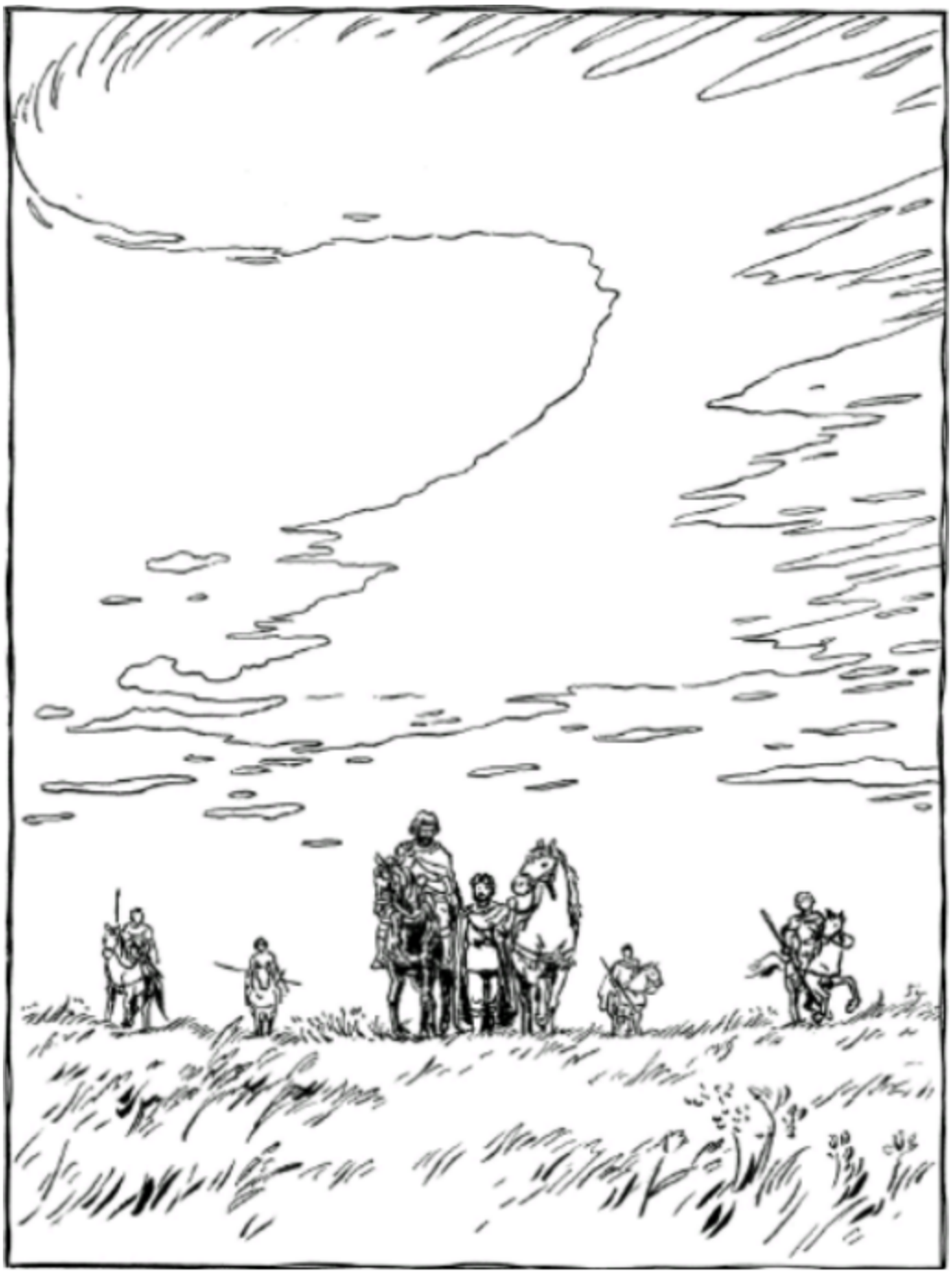
Chapter 1 - Hunting

The high, shrill note of a whistle echoed through the trees. Hunting dogs howled in response, adding their voices to the sound. In the summer the forest floor was darkened by the rich canopy of leaves overhead, but it was autumn now, and many leaves had fallen, allowing shafts of burnished autumn sunshine to reach the ground. In front of the forest, a wide grassland spread out to the horizon. Grass that had been lush and vibrant green in summer was now bleached and withered as the cool autumn breeze fluttered through it.

Ten riders stood mounted on the grassland on the border of the forest, standing a little ways away from one another. They guided their horses using only their legs, in traditional Rotan style. Each carried a bow and a quiver of arrows strapped to their backs. They faced the forest and peered in, searching for signs of game.

All of the riders were mounted on magnificent, well-tended horses, but there were two figures standing near the center of the others that particularly drew the eye. The king of Rota, Yosam, sat atop a horse so white it seemed to glimmer in the sunshine. Standing a little behind him was his brother Ihan astride a beautiful blue-black horse.

King Yosam had turned forty-five that year. He was a man that rarely ever raised his voice in anger; he rarely spoke at all unless it was necessary. He was widely considered a just, fair and merciful ruler. His retainers and lords as well as Rota's common people revered him with genuine respect.



His younger brother Ihan had recently turned thirty-six. He was taller than Yosam, with a body as lithe and flexible as a whip. His face was intense, with high cheekbones framed by close-cropped black hair. The kindness in his eyes moderated the severity of his appearance somewhat.

Yosam and Ihan's father, the previous king of Rota, had passed away when Yosam had been twenty years old. Having the burdens of kingship and governance placed on him so young had been challenging, but Ihan had helped him through it all. Though it wasn't common in royal families--even their own--Yosam and Ihan were not just allies and relatives, but also genuinely good friends.

Yosam had three daughters, but no son. Because of this, Ihan was not just a prince of Rota, but Yosam's direct heir.

The hunting whistle echoed through the trees again, and the baying of the dogs sounded closer. The hunters mounted on their steeds felt their excitement rising. A brown-yellow blur dashed out of the forest at top speed. Ihan was the first to see it.

"Yosam--look there!"

Yosam looked where Ihan indicated and saw the deer. He encouraged his horse into movement; by the time his horse broke into a gallop, his bow was notched and he was aiming directly at the deer. He maintained perfect control of his horse even as he fired his weapon.

He missed. The deer leaped past a hunter waving a flag to guide the prey and stood still, revealing himself to be a proud adult stag with enormous antlers. The stag was nearly as large as Yosam's horse. His eyes darted from side to side, searching for a way to escape, but he was surrounded on all sides. The stag's breath turned to steam in the frigid air as he planted his legs firmly, faced Yosam's horse, and prepared to charge.

Yosam watched the stag drop his antlers in challenge and faced him head-on, remaining entirely calm. He placed an arrow nimbly between his fingers, nocked it, drew back the arrow and prepared to fire once more.

An instant later, his horse's right foot slid into a hole, causing the horse to stumble. The horse had stepped into the warren of some plains rabbits, and the hoof was now stuck in the hole. Yosam went flying from the saddle, somersaulted through the air and landed on the ground

face-down. The stag tracked his body as he fell, and did not back down from his charge.

Arrows flew at the stag from all sides. They all hit their target, but the stag did not turn and flee. Ihan realized that arrows wouldn't be fast enough to turn the stag aside, and threw his bow away. He freed his short spear from the straps on his saddle and threw the spear into the the stag's side, his arm describing a perfect arc as the spear left his grasp.

Just before the hooves of the stag stomped on Yosam's head, there was a mighty thwack as Ihan's spear embedded itself in the stag's side. The stag fell over immediately, hitting the ground with great force. After kicking weakly for a few moments, the stag laid still on the ground.

Ihan dismounted in haste and ran up to his brother. He helped Yosam stand as the other hunters let out a cheer. Yosam was pale and a bit stunned, but uninjured. He panted a little, still catching his breath, and grinned a bit sheepishly. "Thank you for helping me escape an untimely demise once again," he said to Ihan.

"What are little brothers for?" Ihan asked. He laughed and wiped the mud from Yosam's shirt.

"Is Yalras all right?" Yosam asked. Yalras was the name of his favorite horse. Another hunter led Yalras before Yosam. The poor beast hung his head as if he blamed himself for the accident that had caused Yosam to be thrown.

Yosam smiled fondly at Yalras. "There, there. It wasn't your fault. It was the fault of the plains rabbits for building their warrens wherever they please without any regard for others." He patted Yalras' right foot, then checked it over to make sure nothing was broken. When he discovered the leg to be sound, he breathed an entirely audible sigh of relief.

The other hunters and Yosam's servants and chief retainers rode up and offered the king their solicitous concern. Yosam granted the antlers of the stag to his brother as a gift, so the hunters removed the antlers from the stag and offered them up to Ihan while they were still dripping

with blood. Ihan held the antlers over his head for everyone to see, and the hunting party cheered again. Ihan passed the antlers to his attendants and ordered them to return home with the prize.

The stag was too heavy to be carried as-is, so four attendants severed the beast's limbs. They laid a leather dropcloth down before cutting off the stag's legs so that blood wouldn't soak into the ground and attract more predators. When they opened the stag's stomach, steam rose into the cold air, and a vaguely unpleasant smell like bile rose from the carcass.

King Yosam split the stag's liver with Ihan. Each of them took a bite of the liver, then passed their piece to the hunters surrounding them so that they could eat their share. Usually, a hunt wouldn't end until they'd brought down at least two or three deer, but everyone was still a little spooked by the king's fall today. The hunting party decided to withdraw to Ihan's castle for the night.

Yosam refused to ride Yalras until he could confirm for certain that his leg had not been injured. He took Yalras' bridle and walked ahead of him. Ihan gave Yosam a fond look and boosted him up into the saddle of his own favorite horse, Karam. He took Yalras' reins and walked beside his brother.

Servants and retainers hurriedly dismounted to offer their own horses to Yosam and Ihan, but Ihan commanded, "Stop. Remain mounted so that you can protect us should the need arise. The king and I are going to walk slowly for a little while."

The servants and retainers bowed and followed Ihan's orders. They mounted up and spread out a bit to better protect Yosam and Ihan on every side. Ihan started walking with long strides. He looked up at Yosam and said, "I'll be so lonely when you go back to the capital. I know it's still warm in the south. Every year, when you leave after the autumn hunting season, I swear you take the rest of the warm days with you, and leave us nothing but cold, harsh winter."

"Hm," Yosam said. "The wolf attacks last winter were among the worst we've had, weren't they?"

"Yes," Ihan said, "and this year's not starting off well, either. I've already heard about wolf attacks from every clan head in the north. There have been a lot of injuries, and some casualties. This year our grain harvest was fair, but there was an epidemic of disease among our mahan sheep. Most of them have died. When you add the wolves on top of it all, this winter is starting to look like a dangerous one for our people. Without the sheep for milk and wool, some may freeze or starve to death," Ihan said tensely. "I think we should lower the taxes on the northern clans this year. We should probably increase them a bit in the south to make up for it, since they had a good harvest this year. And it would help the north a lot."

Yosam's lips twitched upward in a somewhat nervous smile. "The southern lords won't like that. Are you planning to antagonize them again?"

Ihan snorted through his nose. "I don't care about them right now. The northern clan heads support our family directly and are more involved in our affairs. The southern lords use their blood ties to us to leech our resources and live a life of luxury in the capital while the northern clan heads actually work to keep people fed. I value our northern clan heads more than the southern lords. They're the backbone of this country."

He looked up at Yosam with a secretive sort of smile. "I've heard that the Crown Prince of Sangal's wife Zina is about to give birth. If it's a boy, there'll be a coronation ceremony in Sangal before very long. When I consider the expenses we may have to incur in the coming months, I can't help but think that we of the royal family will have to pass a somewhat harsh and frugal winter ourselves. We'll share in the suffering with the southern lords so that they won't be singled out."

Yosam grinned broadly. "If that's the plan, I shall dedicate my all to hunting, starting tomorrow morning. As head of the family, it's my responsibility to make sure we don't starve over winter."

Ihan smiled in response to Yosam's teasing tone. He almost never showed this light-hearted part of himself to anyone else--certainly not

to his servants or retainers. Very few people knew that Yosam even had a light-hearted side to him.

"I forbid it," Ihan said. "If you go out there alone, you'll be food for the wolves. The country couldn't survive such a devastating blow." Ihan became suddenly serious. "About what we were saying before... We should really start increasing the population of brown shahan sheep nationwide. They survived the plague epidemic while the mahan sheep did not. What do you think about sending out a formal proclamation to the clan heads?"

In a lower voice, Ihan continued, "Most of the shahan sheep we have now belong to the southern lords. If we use their supply to increase their population elsewhere, even if the plague breaks out again next year, the harm it does will be greatly reduced. The climate is so much warmer and more humid in the south, which is closer to both the equator and the ocean. The north is forced to rely on goats, sheep, and cows raised on the grasslands, but the southern lords and those who serve them have more options. If the wealth gap between the north and the south continues to grow at its current rate, it won't be good for the country. Right now, I think we need to do do all we can to help the north."

Yosam thought for a moment, then asked, "Do you remember the last time you said that to me?"

Ihan frowned deeply, then nodded.

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Ihan had recommended increasing Rota's population of shahan sheep once before, to protect against the outbreak of the disease that mahan sheep were so susceptible to. Yosam had refused him then, believing that the time wasn't right. Besides, the people of Rota loved mahan sheep, which were white like the snow of the mountains. The brown shahan sheep were widely considered dirty and inferior. But wool was wool, no matter its color, and clothing made from brown wool

was just as good and warm as clothing made from white wool. The milk and mutton of shahan sheep usually tasted better than that of mahan sheep if the taste-testing was done blind, but this fact was rarely acknowledged. Shahan sheep had always been seen as dirty or inferior in some way, and such a popular conception was not easy to change.

There was another factor that affected this problem, and that helped account for Yosam's first refusal. When Ihan had first brought his proposal to increase the population of shahan sheep to Yosam, his reputation had recently been tainted by scandal.

Ihan remembered what he'd said to Yosam then: "So they think I'm some kind of freak, huh? Let them. I don't care." That was more than ten years ago now.

At that time, Ihan got lost in the woods and fell in love with a woman of the Tal people. He was on an inspection tour of Rota's border towns near a remote outpost when a blizzard hit and separated him from his servants and retainers. Ihan would have frozen to death if a Tal family hadn't found him and taken him in.

The Tal family made a living as forest trappers. Ihan stayed with them in their simple hut until the blizzard passed over. Until that time, Ihan had never seen a Tal person up close. On the rare occasions when he'd seen them from a distance, they'd always avoided looking at him by pulling their hoods up over their heads to hide their faces. Consequently, Ihan had a somewhat negative perception of the Tal people before being taken in by them.

When Ihan looked at the woman coaxing warmth into his frostbitten limbs and nursing him back to health for the first time, he was smitten by her beauty. Her face was like a pure white flower, and her eyes were clear and transparent like pools of still water. She was filthy--of course she was; she was a poor trapper's daughter--but there was something dignified about her that caught and held Ihan's attention.

Singers and tellers of fairy tales liked to talk about love at first sight, but Ihan didn't think such a thing really existed. He laughed at people who thought it did. He believed that people who fell in love did so over

time as they got to know and respect one another for who they truly were. Anyone that fell in love in an instant, or even in the space of a day, was only experiencing idle infatuation that would vanish as soon as it had appeared.

Ihan believed that. He always had. But when he fell in love with Torisha, he did so embarrassingly quickly. When she looked him in the eyes for the first time, his whole body felt like it was on fire. He thought about her whenever he woke to find her gone, and his heart pounded with excitement whenever she returned. When this pattern repeated over the course of several days, Ihan knew himself to be--unfortunately--in love.

Ihan knew that his love for her would never be accepted by Rotan society. The gap in status between them was too far to bridge. Neither the royal family nor ordinary Rotans would ever accept such a match.

The royal family stood upon the grand stage of Rota's politics and government, but the Tal people had sworn an ancient oath to never involve themselves with Rota's political affairs. The Tal people had lived separately from other Rotans in isolated tribes for hundreds of years. The Tal people and Rota's royal family were linked by a secret that necessitated this separation. But Ihan wanted to discard the past in favor of a better future. He'd always believed that the most important moment in anyone's life was *now,* the immediate present. Now was the only time to make decisions that would affect the future.

Smaller changes that occurred throughout history often resulted in much more significant change over time. Ihan believed the world capable of change--he even believed it capable of change on a grand scale. But he knew that large-scale changes would take time, and that those changes would never happen without a lot of smaller intermediary changes building upon one another first. He considered it his role to open the way to more significant pathways of change. He didn't care at all about his reputation. He knew himself to be a good person, so it didn't matter to him if others thought ill of him.

That's why he told his servants everything when he finally returned to them after the blizzard. And that wasn't all. He returned to visit Torisha several times even after going home to the palace. He turned a deaf ear to the servants and lords that advised him against such an attachment. And so, almost overnight, Ihan's reputation was tarnished almost beyond repair. The southern lords used his indiscretion to their advantage and blocked every reform proposal that he brought forward from then on.

Ihan had no patience for slander, but the rumors became so bad that Yosam was compelled to reprimand him publicly, even though he hadn't wanted to. As severely as possible, Yosam told Ihan, "Even if it is just slander, it has done incalculable harm. People won't forget this--not in ten years, not in a generation." Seeing Yosam so serious surprised Ihan. He realized then that he couldn't laugh the situation off. Though it irked him, Ihan devoted more serious thought to his own reputation after that.

After Ihan turned twenty, he started understanding matters that had been opaque to him before. He understood his brother's grave and serious mode as his way of expressing what he believed to be the plain, hard, and absolute truth. Ihan made a point of avoiding having Yosam talk to him so seriously by taking special care with his own conduct.

Yosam's first refusal of his proposal to breed more shahan sheep came just after the scandal with Torisha had become widespread knowledge. Yosam spoke gravely to him then, too, and the effect his words had on Ihan was profound. He realized that he would have to give up Torisha for the country's sake. There was no way for a prince of Rota to take a wife from the Tal people.

But Ihan wasn't the sort of person to give up easily, so he asked if there was a way--or if a way could be made.

Yosam was typically kind-hearted, but when Ihan asked that of him he actually yelled: "You know the reason the royal family cannot wed the Tal people! Do you plan to endanger the entire nation for the sake of your infatuation!?" It was the only time he'd ever shouted at Ihan about

anything, and the first time he'd ever rebuked him so severely. Ihan believed that such rage on Yosam's part went entirely against his essential nature.

"Yes, I know," Ihan said. "I've heard the tale that some of the Tal people have the ability to invite a terrifying god to use them as vessels, and that this god grants powers of death and destruction that come from another world. It is to prevent such a calamity that the Tal people live isolated in their forests.

"But I believe that the tale's primary purpose is to increase the division and hatred between our peoples, so that the Tal people will always be too despised and feared to ever take on a political role. And I'm aware that if I did marry a Tal woman and have a child, that child might inherit the power of the terrible Tal god." Ihan felt himself blushing as he spoke. "But not every Tal person is born with this power. The woman I love is a normal woman, and has no capacity to use magic at all."

Yosam shook his head slowly. "It doesn't matter. You must not have anything more to do with that woman. Marriage between us and the Tal people is forbidden. We must act in the best interests of our own people, who would also oppose such a match."

Ihan flushed bright red for a moment. "You despise her only because she is Tal. That's not a reason; it's prejudice. It's the role of the royal family to guide the nation as it changes its thinking over time. If we see disaster ahead of us, we change course to avoid it. I know this relationship will bring me trouble in the future, but I would like to use it steer the country in a better direction. And I'll never even know if that's possible unless I try. Please."

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Ihan's love ended suddenly, but not because he gave it up. When he went to visit Torisha after speaking with Yosam, she had vanished without a trace. Ihan went briefly mad and used every means at his

disposal to search for her, but he couldn't find anyone who knew where she had gone. As Ihan's hope faded, Yosam had said to him, "Try to consider the girl's feelings. If she became your wife, she'd have to live with us at the royal palace, hated and shunned while being cut off forever from her own family and tribe for breaking the covenant between our two peoples. Her life would have been like walking on a bed of nails, all the time. Do you understand that?"

Yosam's words had pierced Ihan's heart. Over a decade had passed since then, and he still remembered them. Ihan had married for the good of the nation and had a son and daughter now, but his first love still remained in his heart. When he slept, he still dreamed of her. Sadly, Ihan was no longer young enough to believe that love could make his dreams come true.

But his love for Torisha had changed him completely. He no longer saw the Tal people as creepy and mysterious people that lived in the woods. When he looked at them now, he saw people that laughed and cried and lived their lives just as he did. He became aware of himself as a member of a family that tyrannized and was justly hated by a significant number of his country's people.

When the people of Rota saw Tal people passing by their homes, they gathered their children inside and locked their doors. Tal people that came to market towns to sell pelts and leather received harsh and discriminatory treatment from the merchants there.

There was a deep divide between the Tal tribes and the rest of Rota's people. Ihan had wanted to begin the work of bridging that divide by marrying Torisha, but fate had proven his desire futile and tragic. Still, Ihan had never given up on introducing reforms to improve the country for everyone, even if only little by little. He'd hoped to chip at Rota's prejudice against the Tal people over time, but over the course of the past decade, little had changed. As he grew older himself, Ihan came to understand hatred and prejudice better--and how hard it was to change.

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Ihan looked up at Yosam in the saddle and asked, "Yosam, do you oppose increasing the population of shahan sheep?"

Yosam considered for a long moment, then said, "No. I think it's a good idea, and now might be the best time to do it. I won't say that this order comes from you; I'll proclaim it myself, as my own plan."

Ihan's face lit up. "Thank you! I don't know why I expected anything less. Even if there's another plague outbreak this winter, or if the wolf attacks worsen, I know you'll see us all through it safe and sound," Ihan said with the fervor of strong conviction.

Yosam suddenly frowned.

"Yosam?"

"Safe and sound, huh?" Yosam asked. "I wonder how long I'll be able to keep the peace." He said this so quietly that Ihan barely heard it. "We must use every means possible to keep the peace, and to prevent the inequality between the north and the south from getting worse. Increasing the population of shahan sheep is an act of major reform. The southern lords must realize that they're not the only ones that have a say in how this kingdom should be run."

Ihan stared straight ahead, then looked up at his brother. "I know the southern lords detained you at court until some time ago," Ihan said. "What did they say to you?"

Yosam grinned bitterly. "What they said last time, and the time before, and the time before. I'm getting tired of refusing them."

"They came to you about Tsuram harbor again? The southern continent still won't give up after all our refusals?"

About half a year ago, the Talsh empire had sent an ambassador to Rota. The Talsh had expanded over much of the southern continent and were always looking to conquer new territory. All of Rota's trade to and from the southern continent went through Sangal, but the Talsh had requested permission to make use of Tsuram harbor in the south of Rota for the purposes of direct trade with their empire. In exchange,

they offered cheaper rates of exchange than Sangal currently offered for Rota's goods.

Talsh was quite distant from Rota by sea. However, two years before, Talsh had conquered one of its neighbors, the island nation of Karal in the Sugal Sea. While the Talsh empire had seemed almost impossibly distant from Rota before this conquest, Talsh ships could travel significantly further north by ship thanks to their acquisition of Karal's archipelago.

The lords and rulers of Rota did not fear that the Talsh empire would invade them simply because the Talsh had conquered Karal. Karal was a blip on the map compared to the nation of Sangal. Conquering a nation by sea was a costly enterprise in terms of both resources and troops. The Talsh would have to spend so much to conquer Rota that the idea wasn't worth considering.

The Talsh empire's expansive trade network proved attractive to Rota's southern lords. One lord in particular, Aman, had been practically frothing at the mouth from eagerness from the very start of negotiations with the Talsh.

"Opening one port will not give the Talsh enough of a foothold to invade." Aman said this to Yosam often. "Rather, it will grant us opportunities to create immeasurable wealth for our people. If we can bypass Sangal's taxes, we can acquire everything from the south more cheaply. I beg you to consider the progress and advancement of our nation as your first and most urgent priority, Your Majesty."

But Yosam consistently opposed opening Tsuram harbor to the Talsh empire. Unlike New Yogo, Rota was unable to produce luxury goods like finely woven cloth and porcelain; unlike Kanbal, Rota had no gem mines. All that the southern continent ever wanted from Rota was metal, especially iron and steel. If the Talsh did engage in direct trade with Rota, they would gain access to the metals harvested from Rota's ore mines and Rota's metallurgical techniques, but Yosam considered these benefits dubious at best. He doubted Rota would benefit much

from such a trade deal at all--metal was heavy, which made it both difficult and expensive to trade across distances.

Wool and fur were lighter as far as trade commodities went, but the market for those was in the north. There was little profit to be made in shipping such goods to Sangal. The more Yosam considered the idea, less he understood Talsh's motives for accessing the port at Tsuram. He didn't think that the Talsh gaining free access to the harbor would benefit Rota at all, but he also didn't think the Talsh trade network would benefit much from such a proposal, either. He deduced that the Talsh empire was really after something else.

If he thought of Tsuram simply as a place for Talsh ships to dock and resupply, that made a certain amount of sense. If they used Tsuram for that purpose, they could build up an infrastructure that more closely connected the northern and southern continents. Tsuram *would* become Talsh's foothold in Rota, no matter what Aman claimed. Opening the harbor safely to them would allow the Talsh to build up trust and encourage Rota to relax its vigilance. Yosam saw it all as a slippery slope or a line of erosion, like rain wearing grooves in stone. Once the Talsh formed a safe path between the northern and southern continents for themselves, they would be primed and ready to attack.

Yosam was certain that the Talsh intended to attack Rota in this way eventually. And matters worsened when Yosam considered Rota's current trade agreements with Sangal. If he accepted a trade deal with the Talsh, it would jeopardize Rota's diplomatic relationship with one of its closest allies. Rota and Sangal had always been on good terms. Driving a wedge between them could only work to the Talsh empire's advantage.

"I'll be glad to get away to Sangal for a time," Yosam said. "I'd like to strengthen our alliance with them as much as possible." He looked at Ihan. "While I'm gone, I'm counting on you to protect Rota and hold it together."

Ihan nodded tightly. "The southern lords view the north as nothing but dead weight. Ensuring that the clan lords get along is the role of the

royal family, and I won't shirk it. It'll be tough, but I know how to keep them united."

Ihan and Yosam shared a similar sense of dread. While Yosam lived, it was doubtful that the southern lords would rebel. But if something happened to Yosam, it was unclear if the southern lords would follow Ihan's lead. Yosam had no doubt that Ihan could and would rule well, and he was incredibly popular in the north. But the southern lords despised Ihan. Yosam believed that when the time came for Ihan to inherit the crown, he would not be able to keep Rota whole.

Ihan and Yosam walked together in silence for a while. Cold dew seeped into Ihan's shoes as he walked. Yosam spoke first. "There's another thing I want you to check on for me. Has there been any news from Shintadan since the massacre?"

Ihan shook his head. "No. Sufar and the others are gathering intelligence, but they haven't learned anything definite yet."

"Hm." Yosam listened to the horse's hooves swish through the leaves below him. "That woman who entered the forbidden forest was executed at Shintadan. Early reports describe the scene as--well, unbelievable. Give Sufar and the others your full cooperation and support."

Ihan looked up at Yosam and grimaced. "I read those initial reports, too. They say that the cause of the massacre could have been Talhamaya, the terrifying god of the Tal people--but I doubt it. Sufar is one of the Kashal, one of our most skilled hunters. If he'd caught Talhamaya's scent, he would have told us that in no uncertain terms. The report confirmed that the executed woman didn't have the power to summon Talhamaya."

Yosam nodded. "Sufar's report indicated that the executed woman was entirely ordinary. It's not at all clear what she was doing in the forbidden forest. She seemed to be a random woman that violated the prohibition for no reason."

"It had to be a wolf attack. That's what I think," Ihan said.

Yosam smiled bitterly. "We still don't know what happened, but regardless of what did, that woman is already dead. Any potential danger to us seems to be past."

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While the king of Rota hunted, four forest trappers busied themselves with trussing up a deer in the deep woods. It was only a few days after the Shintadan attack. Each trapper lifted a limb of the deer they'd caught out of a large trap, confirming that the deer was unhurt.

The trappers were well acquainted with deer and their habits, so they had rubbed a numbing agent called chatsu into the salt cliffs near the river that the deer liked to lick so much. Chatsu was made from a rare grass, so they had to use it sparingly. The deer was for a special ceremony of the Tal Kumada, the Shadow Priests of the Tal people. Only the priests conducting the ceremony to the god Talhamaya were allowed to sacrifice the deer; the trappers had been ordered to deliver the deer to the altar without a scratch.

The trappers were all Tal people. They usually passed their lives secluded in the woods, but a few times a year they entered Rotan trading posts and markets to sell furs and dried meat. The people of Rota were terrified of the woods, believing that wolves and monsters lurked behind every tree.

The trappers carrying the deer traveled through the Shan forest, which stretched in a long narrow strip along the northern border of Rota. In the Rotan language, shan meant "fear." The Tal people considered the Shan forest sacred. The eastern edge of the forest was fairly close to Shintadan prison fortress. In its center, the ruins of the Tal people's ancient capital city still stood, though the Tal people were forbidden to enter them. The western edge of the forest touched a deserted wasteland. At the very tip of the forest, to the south, lush grass grew all the way up to the treeline, surrounding an ancient temple to the goddess Afal.

Day and night, Tal priests offered fruit and grains to Afal inside the temple. Most people didn't know about the painted gate at the back of the temple called the Akazu no Mon, the gate that never opens. It was not a real gate, but a painted picture with magical properties that had been drawn there to prevent the entry of Talhamaya, Afal's daughter, the terrifying god of the Tal people.

There were three temples to Afal in Rota, all built in the Shan forest. All of them had gates that did not open painted on their rear walls, which served as seals to bind the god to her own world and forbid her appearance in this one. Other temples to Tal gods had also been built in the forest, and these were tended and guarded by the Tal Kumada--the Shadow Priests.

The trappers set the deer down gently on the bank of a river. The river was quite shallow here, and ran over a bed of small smooth stones. On the other side of the river, ten figures in brown robes stood waiting for the trappers. Two old women and three old men standing at the front of the group were Shadow Priests, while the mixed group standing behind them were their apprentices. The faces of the priests were as grave and solemn as if they'd been etched in stone.

The priests pointed to the trappers. They lifted the deer again and carried it into the center of the river. The Shadow Priests gathered water from the river in their hands and poured it over the deer to purify it. When this task was done, the priests gave the trappers a signal, and the trappers lifted the deer once more and crossed the river.

They followed the priests up a narrow path into a forest grove. Trees surrounded them on all sides. As they walked, the leaves rustled loudly above them. The monkeys that watched over the temple of Talhamaya came to greet them, surveying their approach from high above in the red-gold autumn trees.

The Tal Kumada traveled uphill toward the temple to begin the ritual. The monkeys followed them, bringing their own offerings. They didn't make a single sound, but lined up behind the Shadow Priests and watched their progression. As the priests and trappers took the last

remaining steps to the temple entrance, the nervousness on their pale faces was plain to see.

The Shadow Priests had something heartbreaking to consider. They had come to this place short time before to pass judgment on a woman that had violated their ancient prohibition by entering the Tal capital city at the center of the Shan forest. That woman's name was Torisha. She was a young mother; her children, Chikisa and Asra, were only fourteen and twelve years old. The Tal Kumada had decided to punish her, but they'd still wanted to do something to prevent her execution, for the sake of the children. However, that hadn't proved possible. Torisha had committed an unforgivable crime, so they had abandoned her to the Rotan judges that had condemned her to death.

The memory of what had happened to Torisha weighed heavily on them. The priests hung their heads as they approached the entrance to the temple. After Torisha's execution, the Tal Kumada learned that Torisha's children had vanished from Shintadan prison fortress. The orphaned children hadn't known how to find their friends and allies, and their current whereabouts were unknown. The Tal Kumada didn't even know if the children were still alive.

Torisha first came to these woods some sixteen years ago. No one knew where she'd come from. She didn't speak much at first. She lost her previous home and all her belongings in some kind of terrible accident. There were no relatives or friends for her to rely on, so the Tal Kumada gave her a small hut to live in and permission to live and work in the forest.

Tal people in the same situation as Torisha were not particularly rare. There were times when the Tal people rioted against the Rotan people. When the violence ended and Rotan officials attempted to hunt down the Tal rebels, many of the rebels fled into the deep woods, where the Shadow Priests would conceal and protect them.

Torisha gained a reputation as something of a recluse. She was certainly a woman of few words, but she was also known for speaking with intelligence and forthrightness. But the longer she spent among

the Tal Kumada, the more she changed. At first, she listened quietly while the Shadow Priests prayed to the gods and explained their teachings, but one day, she openly rejected a priest's interpretation of the gods. Her rejection was so deeply felt that she never returned to any of the temples after that, nor did she permit her children to go to the temples by themselves. Separated and cut off from her people, Torisha committed a terrible crime--she disturbed the grave of a god. It was a tragic story.

The Tal Kumada knew that the massacre that occurred after Torisha's execution was caused by Talhamaya. The priests feared Talhamaya's destructive powers greatly--but they did not understand how Torisha had come to possess them. Children born with the power to invite the god into themselves were called Chamau. Had she become one of the Chamau by sneaking into the forbidden forest? That didn't make any sense. Torisha had been an ordinary woman in every way. She hadn't even been able to see the other world that all magic weavers could see.

The Tal Kumada were all able to see the world of the gods. They could also see the ordinary world superimposed over it, so they were always looking at both worlds at the same time. They doubted Torisha could have developed such a power, especially without their knowledge. The power that the Tal Kumada shared could be sensed. The sensation of this power could not easily be described in words, but it seemed to unite them all, heart to heart and mind to mind.

None of them had felt any hint or spark of magical energy from Torisha. Many of them believed that Asra had inherited the power of the Chamau, but children needed time to develop their capabilities fully, so they couldn't be certain.

Long ago, people that possessed the power to see the world of the gods had been the rulers of the Tal nation. Children born with these powers in modern times were called Ramau, and sent to one of the temples to live their lives in service to Tal's gods. Harsh laws governed their lives; they were not permitted to marry or have children. At the age of fourteen, they became the apprentices and servants of the Tal

Kumada and learned to chant the traditional prayers to the gods. They also began assisting the Tal Kumada with their rituals at that age. They studied meditation techniques and learned to control their power. Their instructors emphasized the importance of remaining calm and level-headed at all times. Those that lived to reach the age of forty became Tal Kumada themselves.

The life of a Tal Kumada priest was not exciting or glamorous, but there was honor and dignity in their role. They worked to maintain peace in Rota. That was their primary function.

Every once in a while, when a child was discovered to be a Ramau, their parents would go mad and try to keep them from going to the temples. Perhaps Torisha discovered Asra's power somehow, and that was what motivated her rash deed. Some of the priests considered such an explanation likely, but not all of them were convinced. They didn't think Torisha would do something as foolish as break into the forbidden forest to awaken the power of a terrifying god merely so that Asra would not be taken from her. She must have had another reason. Maybe she'd lost her mind.

The temple of Talhamaya was in the forbidden forest, in the ancient Tal capital. The priests that neared the temple now were servants of Afal. The purpose of their lives had been to protect the world against Talhamaya. As the temple came into view before them, they stood in place and shivered. None of them understood Torisha's motivation for going in there.

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The trappers following the deer walked silently behind the Shadow Priests as they made their way through the dark forest. They saw three large trees growing from the top of two enormous boulders. The boulders were five times as high as a man, and were separated by a gap large enough for a person to pass through. The other side of the gap

was shrouded in total darkness. The roots of the trees twined around one another and the large stones.

The tree roots and boulders were all covered in a thick layer of moss. Directly in front of the boulders was a wide clear space paved with flagstones. An altar rose out of the center of the space. This was

the temple of Talhamaya. The gap between the boulders had been made to allow the sacred river that carried Talhamaya into the human world.

There was a grave in the center of the temple. Long ago, an unfortunate woman had become united with the god, and her body had been buried here. It was an utterly forbidden place; no one was allowed to visit the gravesite. But Torisha had. She had entered into that forbidden and sacred area with Asra, breaking the covenant that the Tal people had made so many years ago.

Sunlight reflected off the trees and poured over the boulders like water transformed into light. The Tal Kumada and their apprentices halted in front of the altar and gazed fearfully at the temple. The moss growing in the cleft between the boulders appeared to be blue. Thin shafts of light bounced off the rock walls, constantly moving and shifting like the undulation of waves. As the waves crested within the cavern, the priests clearly felt the presence of a large body of water somewhere nearby, feeding the current of the river that flowed through the gap in the rocks from the other world. Some of the priests were even able to see the water's surface as water flowed into and out of it, to and from unknown sources and destinations. A wide, deep lake was faintly visible to them, flickering in and out of their awareness like a mirage.

It was late autumn, and much of the moss covering the trees and boulders was brown and withered, but the blue moss growing between the two large boulders was vividly and vibrantly alive. The light reflected from the moss was a fresh, warm sea green.

The Tal Kumada stared in silent fascination at the temple. Half a year ago, the Tal Kumada had sensed that the sacred river of Talhamaya was flowing again for the first time in any of their lifetimes. They'd been so stunned that they hadn't known what to do for quite some time. According to ancient Tal legends, this magical river from Noyuk, the other world, was formed from snow melting off the mountains and converging into a single strong stream of water. The goddess Afal, who had created everything, used this river to regulate Noyuk's seasons and weather. When it became spring in Noyuk, the snow from the

mountains melted to form this river; the river carried nourishment into the human world that was beneficial to all living things.

For as long as anyone could remember, this cycle had repeated, with the sacred river of Noyuk flowing into Rota at the beginning of Noyuk's spring. Although the river couldn't be seen by ordinary means, its benefit was clearly and deeply felt. It watered Rota's trees and grasslands, granting Rota rich harvests of grain.

Pikuya, the sacred blue moss growing in the gap between the two temple boulders, grew in abundance everywhere during Noyuk's spring. Animals that ate it grew fat and increased their numbers. Wolves would also eat it, and would rarely attack livestock even in the middle of Rota's winter.

Half a year ago, spring had come again to Noyuk. Spring in the world of the gods was long--it would last for a hundred years. Rota would enjoy the benefits of the sacred river for the next century. However, Talhamaya, the goddess of disaster, had ridden the sacred river's current into the human world with the arrival of Noyuk's spring.

One of the Tal Kumada covered his face and said, "Hasal Ma Talhamaya--the river from which Talhamaya flows--we revere you. Please soothe and calm Talhamaya in your waters, so that she will never flow again into this world."

The Shadow Priests shuffled forward toward the altar, step by slow step. They stared down at the blood that had been left from many previous sacrifices. The monkeys that guarded the temple carried off the sacrifices, but did not bother with cleaning up the blood.

The priests ordered the trappers to place the deer they carried onto the altar. "We offer up this sacrifice. Please use the blood of this creature to appease Talhamaya." The Tal Kumada chanted a prayer together.

One of the priests opened his eyes wide and sucked in a harsh breath. "Look!"

The other Tal Kumada frowned and faced the same direction as the frightened priest. Part of the blue moss growing between the rocks was

stained red. When the priests looked closer, the current of the river as it flowed through the cleft sent out ripples of water tinged with red at the edges.

The priests looked at each other in alarm. "It's a sign."

"The Chamau lives."

The Tal Kumada shivered from head to toe. They were certain that the blood they saw in the cleft was not due to the sacrifice they'd just made.

"Didn't the Chamau die at Shintadan? This is impossible."

"When Torisha was executed, that moss was stained red as it is now. I thought she called upon Talhamaya's power there, for the first and last time--but the blood is still there."

The aged Tal Kumada priests watched blood flow down the Hasal Ma Talhamaya river in horror. Behind them, their apprentices cast their eyes down. Many of them smiled at one another while their masters were too distracted to look at them. Unlike the terrified Tal Kumada priests, the apprentices interpreted this event as a sign of hope, and the light of expectation dawned in their eyes.

Chapter 2 - Clever Beasts

Tanda sat on the floor of a cheap inn on a cheaper straw mat. It was still dark. His arms and legs were were bound so tightly that his wrists were numb and his back ached. His journey here had been long and grueling. He'd spent most of the trip lashed to the back of a horse like luggage. Every time the horse had galloped under him, he'd received the full shock of the movement in his gut.

Sufar was always rushed and irritable. No matter how difficult the journey became, he would do nothing to decrease their pace. Tanda had thrown up more than once, and cried out every time the horses broke into a run. Chikisa had received the same treatment as him, but he'd been drugged and hadn't yet awakened. Sometimes he would groan or gasp in pain. Tanda wanted to check on him now, but he'd been tied

firmly to a post that supported the inn's roof, and the rope wasn't slack enough for him to slip free and reach Chikisa, who laid stretched out unconscious on the other side of the room. The young woman that Balsa had knocked unconscious was also traveling with Sufar, Tanda, and Chikisa, but the two magic weavers that she'd brought with her were chasing Balsa and Asra.

I only managed to buy her a little time. I hope Balsa got away all right.

The men chasing Balsa were magic weavers. If they were anything like Sufar, they could use the eyes of animals as their own. The animal Tanda feared most was Sufar's hawk. He was certain that Sufar's soul was bonded to it, which meant that he could control it completely. And it had seen Balsa before, so it would know her on sight. It might be flying the skies searching for Balsa and Asra right now. Tanda wished he'd talked to Balsa about that hawk and its capabilities when he'd had the chance, but it was too late for regrets now. He tried not to worry about things he could do nothing about, but he was itching to do *something*, anything. He realized that he would have to trust Balsa--again. He'd always trusted her.

Tanda smiled sadly to himself. He'd been taken hostage against Balsa, which was pathetic. He clamped down on his disgust with himself and focused on what he could do, which was learn and observe. He and Chikisa were being kept together, so Tanda could at least guess at Sufar's immediate intentions.

The door of the room opened, revealing the young woman Balsa had knocked out. She carried a steaming cup of what appeared to be tea. She knelt down next to Tanda, forced his mouth open, and poured the tea down his throat. It was very hot, but Tanda drank it down without resistance. He could tell from its aroma that it was some kind of medicine. Perhaps Sufar had decided to give Tanda something for his nausea caused by such rough treatment while traveling.

"Help Chikisa before you help me," Tanda gasped after he'd drunk approximately half of the liquid in the cup.

The woman looked at Tanda with cold calculation. Her eyes were as bright and clear as the surface of a frozen winter lake. Tanda got the sense that the mind behind those eyes was like the water of a lake in winter beneath its frozen surface--unfathomably deep, and more than cold enough to kill. Her face was pale and sickly-looking, and her forehead was wrinkled by frown lines. Tanda thought her features looked harsh and unforgiving--but she also looked more than a little like Sufar. He'd been struck by the resemblance the first time he'd seen her.

"Are you Sufar's daughter?" Tanda asked.

The question affected her like being pricked by a thorn. Her expression displayed her irritation clearly. Tanda didn't know it, but seeing such a naked expression of raw emotion on Shihana's face was exceedingly rare.

Shihana hated people like Tanda and Balsa. They rushed in and made decisions solely based on the information in front of them, without bothering to find out more or dig any deeper. She was sure that they believed they were good and virtuous people, but she despised them.

Shihana leaned closer to Tanda and whispered in tight, precise Yogoese: "I'm Shihana. Remember my name. I'm going to kill that woman." Her pupils contracted sharply, becoming as small as pinpricks.

Tanda remembered how Shihana's fight with Balsa had ended, and said, "Even though Balsa didn't kill you?"

Shihana smiled menacingly. "We'll catch her soon. And she's too soft to kill us. We are Kashal--Rota's hunting dogs. What we chase, we catch."

Tanda's expression did not change, but he remained silent. If Shihana and Sufar considered themselves hunting dogs, then Balsa could be considered their prey. But when he thought in those terms, he realized that Balsa would be an incredibly clever and crafty beast. They wouldn't catch her easily; she'd spent half her life being pursued by people that wanted to kill her. Tanda felt that Shihana was severely

underestimating Balsa...but she probably wouldn't make that mistake for long.

Shihana tore her eyes away from him and stood up. She crossed the room and crouched in front of Chikisa, who was similarly tied up at the other end of the room. She lifted his head gently and pinched his cheeks to get his mouth open, then helped him swallow the remaining medicine in the cup. She whispered in Chikisa's ear in Rotan: "Hang in there. As soon as we find your sister, everything will change."

Chikisa looked up at this strange woman with weary eyes. His vision was blurry, and it was clear he hadn't understood her.

When the medicine cup was empty, Shihana stood and faced Tanda once more. She gazed down at him from above with an expression of pure contempt. "You and that woman are complete idiots. You don't see anything unless it's right in front of your faces. Maybe you'll realize that, before you die," she spat, then spun on her heel and left the room.

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Balsa's stolen horse was wild and spirited. After leaving the inn, Balsa let the horse gallop a little ways down the main road before turning off onto a smaller trail near a river. She pulled up on the horse's reins and let it rear, using the added momentum from the horse's throw to direct her and Asra safely into the river's flowing current.

The horse seemed relieved to be rid of its unfamiliar riders, and dashed off in a straight line. She hoped that the horse would run a long way ahead of her and Asra before it got caught. If Balsa and Asra's pursuers followed the horse's trail, they'd be led off in a wildly different direction, at least for a little while--that was Balsa's hope.

But Balsa also knew that the horse was exhausted. It probably wouldn't be able to run very far before it needed to stop and rest. If the horse was caught quickly, their pursuers might be able to determine where Balsa had jumped off. The river would conceal their tracks, but if

their pursuers guessed that they'd dismounted at the river, they would only have to search in two directions.

Balsa walked in water up to her ankles for a long time after sending the horse away. The water was cold, but its flow was sluggish, which was fortunate. Balsa tracked the river's depth and speed carefully as she walked. Most rivers she was familiar with had currents that strengthened based on the depth and surface area of the water. Water took the path of least resistance, so shallow streams flowed into deeper ones at increasing speeds; getting sucked in by a rapids current or an undertow was how many people drowned. If she let her guard down, she might be pulled from the shallow shore of the river into the deeper rapids at its center.

Balsa could usually see fairly well in the dark, but tonight the moon was scarcely half-full, so she couldn't make out much. The wound in her side reopened and bled as she walked. Asra's weight on her back felt heavy. She walked through the river slowly, occasionally stumbling over the small smooth stones that lined the riverbed. She gasped every time she took a step.

When Balsa scented the distinctive aroma of kasara grass on the air, she breathed a sigh of relief. The smell of the grass was so powerful that if she stomped on it to crush it, it would cover her and Asra's scent completely for a while. Kasara grass grew in thick clumps in the springy marsh-like ground near the riverbank, so she didn't leave clear tracks even when she stomped on it. The earth beneath her feet filled with water and absorbed her footprints as if they'd been erased.

Balsa felt a blast of cold air cut through her as she walked along the river. She had to find a place out of the wind before they could stop and rest. She climbed uphill from the river's edge and kept climbing for a fair distance. She entered into a forest thicket and found a large tree. She put Asra down, then turned around and returned to the river to fetch water.

Balsa had walked in pathless mountains before, and usually the only way she'd been able to navigate well was to create landmarks for

herself. She wasn't familiar with this area, so she tried to remember the shapes and orientations of the trees as she walked slowly back to the river.

Her entire body was wound as tightly as a thread about to snap. Everything in her encouraged her to run, keep going, keep fleeing because the danger wasn't past. But she couldn't make any rash moves. If she acted without thinking, she'd only make mistakes.

Balsa poured water from the river into two deep bottles made of bamboo. She inspected the ground and the riverbed for tracks and erased all signs of her own passage as she ascended back to the large tree where she'd left Asra.

When she saw Asra, Balsa put down the water she'd gone to fetch and opened her pack. It was probably safe enough for them to sleep here tonight. Balsa unrolled two large sheets of oiled paper from her pack and wrapped herself and Asra snugly under them. Then she gathered Asra to her chest and closed her eyes. Her body needed rest if it was going to heal.

Balsa awoke when early morning light pierced the canopy of the trees above her. Asra was still in her arms; her back was supported by the tree behind her. It was just past dawn and the breeze was cool, but Balsa felt warm with Asra clutched to her. Mist covered the ground in a thin haze.

They'll figure out we ditched the horse soon, *if they haven't already,* she thought.

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Asra woke up when the sleeping medicine wore off. Her throat was so parched it felt burned, and her entire body was entirely too warm. She probably had a fever.

The first thing Asra saw when she opened her eyes was a strange pattern of shadows and leaves. She saw branches winding and twisting around the trunk of a young, thin tree directly in front of her, creating

shadows so dark that they appeared to be carved into the wood. She followed the pattern of branches with her eyes and discovered a ring of shining iron, and above that a wooden scabbard for a blade. It was Balsa's spear, covered in the shifting shadows of the tree cover above them.

When Asra realized what she was looking at, she began to panic. She remembered falling asleep at the inn with her brother, but she was in the forest now and didn't see Chikisa anywhere. She tried to get up and look for him, but someone pressed down gently on her shoulder from behind.

"Sh," a woman's voice said in her ear. "We need to be very quiet. I promise to tell you everything that's happened since yesterday when I can, but we need to stay still and quiet for a while, all right?"

Her voice was low and kind. It made Asra feel safe. But then she realized she was being held by a woman she didn't know, and she stiffened. The woman unwrapped them both from large sheets of oiled paper and lifted up a fat bamboo bottle capped on one end. She removed the cap and offered the bottle to Asra.

"It's water. Drink it nice and slow so that you don't choke."

The cool, sweet water slid down Asra's fever-parched throat. All of her muscles relaxed as she swallowed.

"Does your head hurt?" the woman asked.

Asra shook her head. She felt a little foggy and dazed, but nothing hurt. She wondered why the woman's voice calmed her so much. She didn't know this woman at all, but she wasn't scared.

The woman started speaking slowly, telling Asra about herself. Her name was Balsa. She was the herbalist Tanda's childhood friend. She said that the magic weaver Sufar had been afraid of Asra--that she might cause some kind of disaster--and that he'd planned to kill her and Chikisa. She told Asra that there'd been a fire at the inn, and that they'd fled to this place overnight.

As Asra listened, she realized that this was the same woman she and Chikisa had seen practicing with her spear in the inn's garden. She

remembered what Chikisa had said about her then: "She's definitely good. When I was hurt, she hugged me and helped me calm down."

Chikisa. Her chest was tight with pain; she felt like she was being stabbed with a thousand tiny needles. What had happened to him?

Balsa seemed to guess what she was thinking. "Don't worry," she said. "I'm sure your brother is alive."

Asra started shaking. Balsa rocked her gently in her lap. "Listen. Sufar is after *you*, not your brother. Try to think about what that means."

With great effort, Asra swallowed down her urge to cry. Her breaths were shallow and difficult.

"I'm sure you understand," Balsa said. "As long as you're alive and out of reach, your brother is a valuable hostage. Using him as bait is the easiest way for him to catch you. He won't kill Chikisa until he has you."

As Balsa's words sunk in, Asra felt her ragged breathing become more even. She watched the shadows of the birds flitting through the trees overhead. Their bright voices called out to one another, each to each.

"Do you want to see your brother?" Balsa asked.

Asra nodded.

"I thought so. If you want to see him again, then for now, we have to keep running."

Asra turned to look at Balsa. "Are we going to save him?"

"I'd like to save him as much as you, but that's impossible right now. I'm injured, our opponents are magic weavers, and there are at least four of them. We need time to recover. I don't know if we'll get that time. If we stay in one place for too long, we won't be able to escape. They're searching for us right now. If they catch us, it'll be the end--for us and your brother."

The god could save him, Asra thought. *If I pray to the god, she'll save Chikisa.*

Asra closed her eyes and listened to the sound of the river flowing deep within herself. The whispering water seemed very far away, and it was hard for her to even sense it. She'd felt it flowing so strongly before, in times of fear and anger; the river had swept away her senses and flowed cleanly out of her in a rush--but now she couldn't access it at all.

She wanted to save Chikisa more than anything. She was sure that if she could see the faces of the people hurting him, she would get mad enough to call the god. The river's strong flow would return to her then, and the god would kill her enemies. But when she prayed to the god to take her to her brother, nothing happened. The god only responded to her prayers when she could kill people.

Asra remembered the ugly gash that the god made on on Chikisa's palm on the night she'd summoned the god to the inn. Chikisa had told her that the god slit the throats of all the bad people around them. He'd said, "I don't want to see the god again. All the god does is kill people."

The people that had captured her brother were evil. She was willing to kill them to save him. But even though she felt that way, she had doubts. She felt like she was wandering in the darkness while shrinking into something helpless and small. She had no idea what she should do. She shook in Balsa's arms without calming for a long while.

You must be as still and majestic as the surface of a frozen lake. Asra heard her mother's voice in her ears. People blessed by the god must never give in to their emotions. Asra took a deep, cleansing breath.

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Asra was pitifully thin. Her eyes were huge and round in her emaciated face. She was clearly frightened, but she didn't try to cling to Balsa; she faced her fear alone, staring straight ahead. She was like a tiny brown mouse curled in on itself, knowing that there was nothing it could do to protect itself from the talons of the hawk flying overhead.

Balsa held onto Asra silently until she calmed herself. The birds trilled lightly overhead. Suddenly, all the birds called out shrilly to one

another at once, then fell completely silent.

Balsa looked up at the trees and frowned. There was a hawk circling over them, high above. Balsa placed her hand on Asra's head and pushed her face down. "We need to stay still," Balsa whispered.

After a long silence, the birds in the trees started singing again. Balsa's nervous tension unraveled. Asra twisted herself around to look at Balsa. "There's a hawk up there," Balsa whispered. "Maybe that's why the little birds were scared."

"Why?" Asra said with a little frown as she looked up. "That hawk's pretty small."

"Maybe the hawk's not an ordinary hawk," Balsa said. "Sufar is a magic weaver. I remember seeing hawk just like that one on his shoulder."

"Hawks obey people like that?" Asra asked.

Balsa shrugged. "I don't really understand magic weaving. But I've heard about magic weavers that can see through the eyes of dogs and other beasts. It's hard to detect, and even harder to protect ourselves from."

"Do you think it knows we're here?"

"Probably," Balsa said. "Hawks have good eyes. The oiled paper is brown, so we probably blended in with the trees overnight, but when we showed our faces it was able to find us."

Balsa removed the oiled paper from them completely and folded it up for storage in her pack again. "We need to move on soon anyway, whether the hawk spotted us or not."

Asra tried to get up, but she didn't have the strength to lock her knees. She was in danger of falling, but Balsa caught her from the front and helped her stand.

"Looks like the drug hasn't completely worn off yet, huh?" Balsa asked. She placed Asra's hands against the tree, then removed a bottle from her pack. She removed two small objects that looked like pills from the bottle. She popped one in her mouth and handed the other to Asra.

Asra put it in her mouth and swallowed it easily. It didn't taste bitter like she expected it to: it tasted like honey-sweet flower nectar. Balsa noticed Asra's surprised expression and smiled.

"It's a snack made by mixing the honey from yuna flowers with flour. Isn't it nice? It's convenient to carry, though I'd prefer it if we had the antidote for whatever Sufar gave you. Still, eating something sweet and drinking lots of water should help us get a little stronger, at least."

Asra ate three more pieces of the yuna flower candy and drank lots of water while Balsa stowed everything away in her pack and prepared to move. Balsa settled her pack over her stomach as she had the previous night and gave Asra a piggyback ride.

Balsa assiduously erased all trace of her and Asra's passage as she walked. Even if the hawk led their pursuers directly to this spot, Balsa made their tracks very hard to follow. A patient and tireless pursuer might take the time to shift the fallen leaves from the forest floor to search for faint footprints underneath, but that would take time. All things being equal, Balsa was certain that their pursuers could move faster than them, so she wanted to slow them down as much as possible.

Balsa's footprints weren't as light as she'd like them to be because she had to carry Asra. She knew how to erase her tracks completely, but that would take a lot of time that they didn't have, so she chose a path beneath full tree cover and moved over a thick carpet of leaves with every step. Whenever she could see the sky overhead, Balsa shifted course until she stood under a thick dark canopy of leaves again, zigzagging back and forth through the trackless woods.

It was challenging to find footing in the underbrush, but she didn't want the hawk to catch sight of them again. She wasn't simply being cautious; she had to prevent anyone from discovering her intended destination.

Asra learned Balsa's walking pace and began shifting her body in time with Balsa's steps. She did her best to be an easy burden to carry.

"Where are we going?" Asra whispered in Balsa's ear.

"We're heading for Shirogai," Balsa said.

"Shirogai?"

"If we keep going this way, we'll reach it in two days. It's a big town."

"Why are we going to a town? Wouldn't it be easier to hide in the mountains?"

Balsa shook her head. "The people after us know what they're doing. They know these mountains better than I do. They'd notice the signs of our hiding places because I don't know what looks normal in these mountains."

Balsa reached out to a bush full of hanging blackberries. She gathered a handful and passed them back to Asra. "Crush these and paint your face with the juice," Balsa said. "Make sure to cover your entire face."

"Huh?"

Balsa crushed the fruit in her hands and painted her face with the juice and pulp. Asra frowned as she crushed the fruit between her fingers. More juice came out than she expected, and when the berries were crushed they smelled a lot like freshly cut grass. She closed her eyes and painted her face with the fruit juice.

"Don't forget your ears," Balsa said.

Asra spread more juice on her ears.

"Faces stick out a lot," Balsa said. "In the darkness of the forest or the mountains, a face will look white even if it's far away."

Asra nodded in understanding. Her father had said something similar to her a long time ago. He'd been a trapper, and she remembered times when he'd come home with his face completely covered in mud. When Asra had laughed at him, he'd told her that he had to do that so the animals in the forest wouldn't know he was there.

"Remind me to wash our faces before we get to Shirogai," Balsa said.

Asra was soothed by Balsa's gentle voice and steady steps, and some of her worry eased as they made their way through the trees.

Chapter 3 -The Hawk and the Hound

Sufar cut through the heavens as a hawk in flight. He had raised his maro hawk, Shau, since he was a hatchling, and their bond allowed Sufar to attach his soul to Shau's. He gazed down at the vast expanse of the earth below with the acute eyes of a predator.

Establishing the soul link between him and Shau was still somewhat difficult, despite decades of practice. Sufar always felt a little dizzy and nauseated at first, because the world that Shau saw was very different from his own. He could see much farther distances as a hawk, and the colors of everything he knew and was familiar with were entirely different. The colors he saw as a hawk were unique and vivid; most had no names in human languages.

Sufar also had far more sophisticated methods of focusing his vision as a hawk. While flying, his eyes would automatically focus in on moving objects and animals below; he could see anything from a large herd of grazing deer to a tiny solitary squirrel in clear detail from his high vantage point.

Sound, smell, touch, hearing--every sense that humans had was heightened as a hawk. Bonding his soul to his first hawk at the age of sixteen had shocked Sufar to the core of himself. So *this* was how hawks experienced the world! It was the first time he'd truly understood that the world he interpreted with his own senses was so incredibly varied and different. His perceptions as his ordinary self were limited. The world contained such a richness of perspective that he would never live long enough to experience it all.

Sufar became familiar with many other animal perspectives over the years as well, not just hawks. The world of dogs was dominated by their sense of smell, and colors tended to be more faded and washed-out. He found the eyes of a dog much harder to acclimate to than the eyes of one of his hawks.

Out of all the animals he'd shared a soul bond with over the years, Shau was by far the most comfortable and familiar. He'd raised many hawks over the course of his life, but Shau's essential nature was unusually basic: he wanted to hunt, and kill, and eat. All hawks were like this to a certain degree, but Shau approached his desires with single-minded determination. This quality made it very easy for Sufar to command Shau's movements. Shau understood the need for hunting on a fundamental level. Prey had to be hunted before it could be eaten.

The wind blew strongly beneath his wings. Wind created pathways in the sky similar to how water created currents in the ocean. Shau understood the shift in the wind's direction instinctively; he glided between the air currents with perfect ease. Shau could see best in full sunlight, so Sufar sent him after Balsa and Asra at dawn the night after they'd fled from the inn. Sufar's two apprentices, Mark and Kahal, discovered the place where Balsa had separated from Shihana's horse relatively quickly. Mark and Kahal told Sufar where Balsa had left the road before he'd created his soul bond with Shau. Based on that information, Sufar considered it likely that Balsa intended to enter the mountains through the lower forests.

Sufar chose to fly above the mountains as he continued his search. Two people traveling through the mountains would not leave too much of a trail, assuming their pursuers even knew where to look for them. Sufar's high perspective gave him a wide field of view, but one hawk would not be able to search an entire mountain range alone.

Fortunately, Mark and Kahal were excellent trackers. They were able to follow almost any trail based on very faint traces. In addition to himself and his apprentices, Sufar had the assistance of Shihana, who could bind her soul to many kinds of small animals. Together, the four of them were the Kashal, the hunting dogs of Rota. What they sought, they found.

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Sufar spotted Mark along the side of a road just off a main thoroughfare that led into a town. The side road crossed a small marsh that was deep enough to require a bridge. As Sufar's enhanced eyes focused on Mark, he saw him stooping over the bridge investigating horse tracks. The horse Balsa had stolen was Shihana's favorite, so Mark could easily distinguish that horse's trail from that of other horses.

"Hm. Looks like she fled into the river," Mark muttered.

Sufar descended into the trees. Mark heard the flapping of wings and quickly looked up. He extended his leather-gloved arm so that Sufar could land.

"Kahal and I split up a while ago," Mark said. "The horse tracks continue for a while, so Kahal went to mark that trail. I noticed that the horse's tracks got lighter here--the horse started carrying less weight. I suspect the woman jumped off the horse into the river."

Sufar vocalized a low note in the hawk's throat to indicate his understanding, then launched himself off Mark's arm into the air. Balsa had allowed the horse to run ahead before erasing all traces of where she'd gone next in the river. That's how it seemed, at least, and the uncertainty about which direction she'd chosen had caused Mark and Kahal to split up. Sufar had underestimated Balsa. She was smarter than he'd given her credit for.

If Sufar assumed that Balsa got off the horse sometime in the night and carried the girl, how far could she have gone? The water of the river was very cold at this time of year. She'd probably traveled through it as fast as she could in order to keep warm. She was wounded, but Sufar had seen how she could move, and he didn't think her injury would slow her down much. She'd probably been able to travel a fair distance during the night.

Sufar flew in circles above the trees near the river. He was glad it was autumn. If it was summertime, Balsa and Asra would be completely covered by a thick cover of green leaves. Many of the trees below Sufar had already lost their leaves, and the ground was visible in some places.

Sufar used his hawk eyes to focus in on points of interest across the landscape. Like a hunter stalking prey, he searched for particular signs--large moving shadows or signs of human passage such as footprints or fire. But he discovered no trace of Balsa and Asra. He did his best to remain patient. Some hunts required painstaking effort and care. If he was not the kind of person that couldn't concentrate for long periods of time, he wouldn't be Kashal.

Shau became unbearably hungry--and he shared the hawk's hunger with him. Shau began rejecting his commands in favor of finding food for himself. The hawk stopped looking for people and focused on the movements of small game moving around on the forest floor.

Shau's diversion toward finding food proved fortunate. He hovered over a flock of small birds and fixed his hungry gaze on them. The birds sent up a cry and scattered, and at the same moment Sufar caught a glimpse of something white out of the corner of his eye.

He'd seen someone's face--not clearly; it was possible that the person was looking down. He tried to direct Shau's eyes toward the face he'd seen, and after some effort he was successful. The face he'd seen had been Asra's. Balsa was also on the forest floor near her, wrapped in oiled paper and sitting against the trunk of a large tree. Neither of them had looked up until the small flock of birds scattered.

Balsa was looking directly at Shau.

Sufar knew they had to hurry now. Balsa would be moving soon. He didn't know if he should continue to keep an eye on her personally or if he should set Mark on her trail while he was still within easy flight range of them both. It seemed that Balsa was used to evading pursuers. She would probably create at least one false trail. It was probably for the best if he kept tracking her without interruption.

As soon as Sufar made this decision, he flew up higher to avoid the wary twittering of the smaller birds in the trees below him. When he'd risen up high enough so that he'd be difficult to see from the ground, he started flying in slow circles while keeping his eyes on the patch of forest where he'd seen Balsa and Asra. He caught a glimpse of Balsa

carrying Asra. The sleeping medicine he'd given Asra probably hadn't worn off yet.

Sufar flew toward Balsa, remaining high up so he wouldn't be spotted. He paused in the air at the edge of a clump of trees and waited for Balsa and Asra to reappear.

They didn't. No matter how long Sufar waited, Balsa did not emerge from the trees. He knew that he was faster than most people's running speed while flying, so Balsa shouldn't be able to outpace him in these woods.

Sufar's heart raced with anxiety. Had he truly lost sight of them somehow? Impossible. He widened the scope of Shau's visual field and searched desperately for signs of movement. He saw only birds and small rodents. Shau's hunger increased the longer Sufar searched. Sufar wouldn't be able to fly with him much longer. Sufar did what he could to pacify Shau temporarily and continued looking for Balsa.

She's a very cautious woman.

Sufar's own stomach ached with hunger. Shau's body became difficult to move. Sufar was at his limit. He let go of his compulsion on Shau and allowed him to hunt. He felt, somewhat distantly, Shau's speed and precision as he clawed smaller birds out of the air and devoured them whole. As Shau ate, Sufar tried to figure out how he could have lost Balsa and Asra's trail. He wished now that he'd doubled back to let Mark know where he'd seen them. He could really use someone's help on the ground.

Now that he'd lost them, he had no choice but to return to Mark and the others and share what information he had. He knew Balsa was carrying Asra. Mark would probably be able to track them over land.

After Shau's stomach was satisfied, Sufar reasserted his control over the hawk and directed Shau back to Mark's location. He wasn't far from the bridge where Sufar had last seen him. Mark paced along the bank of the river, clearly searching for tracks.

When Mark caught sight of Shau, he called out to him in a tone of exasperation: "Master, this woman's used to being followed. She walked

along the stones at the bottom of the riverbed. She left almost no tracks. It's going to take a long time to catch her, at this rate."

Sufar used Shau's throat to make two short caws.

Mark's face lit up. "You found them! Guide me, master."

Sufar had Shau fly high again. Mark ran after him along the line of the river. Sufar turned abruptly away from the river into the mountains, sending out a high shrill call so that Mark wouldn't miss the turn. Mark left the river and found himself knee-deep in strong-smelling grass. He tried to wade through the grass and keep moving, but the grass came back together as soon as he spread it apart; he had to tamp it down in order to make any progress.

Did the woman know the properties of this grass, and choose this place to leave the river deliberately? Mark wondered. If so, she was not to be taken lightly. If not for Sufar's eyes, Mark doubted that they'd ever have been able to find her in the rocky, obstructed terrain of the mountains. There were too many convenient places for her to hide.

Last night, Sufar had told Mark and Kahal that the woman worked as a bodyguard. Her work experience likely contributed to her skill in evading the Kashal.

Mark heard Shau's shrill hunting cry above him. He needed to hurry. Mark extricated himself from the tall grass and started climbing up a rocky hill. At the very top of the hill was a clear open space surrounded by trees. The clearing was warmer than the riverbed; the trees blocked out most of the cold autumn wind. It struck Mark as a good place to sleep outdoors in this season.

Mark thoroughly inspected the clearing. Most traces of the woman and girl's passage had been erased or concealed, but Mark had no doubt that someone had slept in this clearing last night. Shau flew in tight circles above him, indicating that Mark had reached the right place.

"I guess we'll need to track them on foot from here," Mark muttered. Shau flew off to find Kahal and guide him to this spot, leaving Mark

alone to continue the search. Mark crouched down and examined the area in minute detail, taking in small sections of the clearing at a time.

At the edge of a grassy patch, Mark discovered one footprint that was almost clear. It was directly beneath a large pine tree; if the print was below almost any other kind of tree the fallen leaves would have covered it up. The needles of the pine tree were so long and thick that Mark couldn't see the sky above it at all. Some of the moss growing on the tree's enormous roots had been rubbed off recently. This was the place where Balsa and the girl had slept.

I've got you now.

Mark smiled. This was only the first step in catching them, but he was excited. He unfurled a strip of white cloth and set it down as a marker for Kahal to find. He pounded an iron stake into the ground and tied the cloth to it so it wouldn't blow away.

As Mark traveled, the sun moved steadily across the sky. The quality of the light on the forest floor became bright enough for him to see well around noon. Mark rummaged around in his pack for food and ate as he walked, slowly but surely following Balsa and Asra's trail. Balsa rarely left clear tracks. She'd left enough for Mark to follow--just--but there were times when he had to pause and examine the ground thoroughly to figure out which way she'd gone.

Mark could tell a lot about Balsa based on the faint traces she'd left behind. Her footprints were uniform in size, shape, and placement, indicating a steady pace. She was clearly carrying the girl; he saw no child's footprints anywhere. Mark expected the woman's footprints to be even deeper than they were because of her added burden--but then he understood at least one reason why she'd decided to move this way. It was probably easier for her to erase all signs of her own passage than it was to stop and conceal the girl's tracks as well. She moved unexpectedly quickly. It seemed like she was used to navigating in the mountains. She definitely knew that she was being followed.

The yellow light of late afternoon slanted through the trees. Mark started to think that it would be hard to catch her before sunset. She'd

been carrying a child all this time and was wounded; she would probably have to stop for rest soon. It would be harder for her to keep going in the dark. She'd gotten a head start with the horse the previous night, but all of the Kashal had been pursuing her relentlessly since then. She must be tired. Mark was exhausted. He felt the start of a buzzing headache at the back of his skull.

The woman he was tracking had a reputation as a short spear wielder, but she'd been able to knock out Shihana in a single hit without using her weapon. No one the Kashal had ever tracked had been able to slow Shihana so effectively before. When Mark had discovered Shihana's unconscious body, he hadn't been able to believe his eyes. He'd been certain at that moment that Shihana must have a lookalike or a twin.

If he continued to chase after the spear wielder until he tired himself completely out, Mark expected that the encounter would go badly for him. He had confidence in himself as a warrior; the straight tempering line on his sword was not there just for decoration. He was also a magic weaver and had learned several disciplines and techniques from Sufar. But he also knew that he was no match for Shihana. The woman he was chasing might have taken Shihana by surprise, but she'd still defeated her. Mark couldn't be too cautious here.

Sufar would also be able to make use of Shau's eyes again tomorrow, after he'd rested and recovered. The magic weaving technique used to bind his soul to the hawk's was very effective, but also exhausting; its main disadvantage was that it could not be used for long periods of time. If Mark rested here and waited for Sufar's support tomorrow, he should be able to cut down the distance between himself and his quarries in no time. Kahal would also be fast on his heels tomorrow; he'd probably discovered the sign Mark left beneath the pine tree by now and was hurrying after him.

A little before the sun set, Mark ceased his search and set up camp for the night. He didn't know how much distance still separated him from the spear wielder and the girl, so he didn't make a fire. It was best if they didn't sense his presence.

Mark awoke a little before dawn the next morning to the sound of footsteps. The shadow of Kahal loomed over him. He carried his shortbow strapped to his back. The weapon lacked the same range and piercing strength as a longbow, but it was easier to carry and conceal while traveling in the woods. It was also much faster to fire.

"You caught up fast," Mark said.

Kahal grinned. The two of them put their heads together and whispered about what they'd learned. Kahal ate rations from his belt pouch while unfolding a large and detailed map of the area. The two of them marked their path from the previous day on the map, then looked up at one another.

"She's running parallel to the western road," Mark said.

"Looks like she means to come out of hiding on the road, somewhere around here," Kahal said, pointing to a place on the map. "She's not from Rota. Staying in the mountains with a child would be difficult, especially with winter coming. She'll head for a town, or perhaps a city. Maybe she'll go to New Yogo--we'd be at a disadvantage there."

Mark pointed to the town of Shirogai on the map. "Shirogai is close to here. It's a large town along the Western Imperial Highway that connects to Kosenkyo, the capital of New Yogo, our own capital, and the capital of Sangal. It's a giant crossroads. No matter where she's headed, it makes sense for her to stop there first."

Light danced in the depths of Kahal's eyes. He took a sip of water, then said, "We should hurry. I'd like to send them to the next world before they reach Shirogai."

Mark packed up the map and started walking behind Kahal. He frowned as he stared at Kahal's back. Kahal was the sort of man that derived immense satisfaction from completing a hunt. Mark tended to prefer the chase. Killing a woman and child in cold blood was beyond him; he needed a good reason to do such a thing. He had a good reason, so he wouldn't hesitate when the time came, but he wasn't like Kahal. He took no joy in killing.

Mark and Kahal parted, each going a different way in the dim light of the early morning. They moved in a semicircle, searching for tracks. They picked up the trail and got the lay of the land where they stood. They didn't want to run into any surprises.

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Around sunset, the tracks Mark and Kahal were following suddenly became deeper and fresher. They were getting close. The day was just about to end. Some soft light still filtered to the ground from the treetops, but the forest floor was almost entirely shrouded in darkness. They'd have to look for a place to camp soon.

Mark halted suddenly. They'd only just found the fresh tracks. The immediate area was muddy and bare of most vegetation. There was probably a marsh nearby. He smelled water. The ground was so wet that it was almost muddy slush.

It was impossible to erase tracks made in such an area. The trail that Mark and Kahal were following now was the clearest it had been for the entire chase. He glanced back at his own footprints, which were slowly filling with water. They would disappear in the mud eventually, though that would take time.

But not much time. If Mark had to guess, he'd say that the tracks they were following now were less than half an hour old. They would catch up soon. Mark steeled himself for the encounter.

Mark picked up the pace as he followed the footprints. The light was rapidly failing, but he could still see well enough to follow the trail, and he had no desire to stop now. Kahal was still some way behind him as he passed out of the muddy marshland into a grassy field.

The trail became a bit more difficult to follow. Right when Mark felt like giving up for the night, an enormous tree loomed up in the half-dark on his left side. From the roots of the tree, something small and shiny reflected the last light of the sun. Mark parted the tall grass surrounding the tree and got down on his knees to take a closer look.

The shiny stuff was scraps of oiled paper. But why would those be here? He saw no other signs of a woman and child. Mark felt a growing premonition of unease and got to his feet. As he stood up, something hard hit him in the base of his skull. Mark blinked, saw stars, and collapsed like a log on the roots of the tree. He rolled over so that his face landed in the mud, then lost consciousness.

Kahal approached the tree from the east, a little behind Mark. He heard the squelch of something hitting the ground with force. He crouched down behind a tree and identified the shadow of someone holding a staff--or perhaps a spear--standing above Mark on the ground.

It's her!

Kahal was always excited when he was permitted to kill what he tracked. Finding this woman at last made him so overstimulated that he trembled all over. Had she killed Mark? Maybe. The idea strengthened his resolve. He felt a brief, cautious twinge of nervousness, but he ignored it. He spread his arms and started moving through the tall grass, making a sound like a gust of wind cutting across the plain. He crossed the grassland and entered a clump of bushes where he concealed himself in the gathering dark.

Kahal loosened his bow on his back. He was ready.

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Balsa considered it likely that she and Asra had been followed from the moment of their flight. She could disguise herself and Asra in the crowd at Shirogai; the problem was the road leading into the town. The road wouldn't provide any cover for them, and Balsa's footprints would be easy to follow on the flat ground. Their pursuers were magic weavers; she didn't know what they might be capable of. Not knowing worried her more than anything.

When she first stepped out onto the muddy ground near the marsh, she realized she wouldn't be able to hide her tracks almost immediately.

She decided to use this opportunity to set a trap. She had the element of surprise in her favor. They were chasing her, coming fast, so with any luck at all they'd fall right into it.

Balsa set down Asra in a sheltered grove of trees and told her about what she was planning for the trap. The mud would make their tracks very clear, so their pursuers were probably coming right for them now. They'd been chasing Balsa and Asra for two days and were probably tired; seeing the trail suddenly become so clear would be exciting--maybe exciting enough for them to barrel blindly forward without checking their surroundings.

Balsa found a tree a little ways away from the muddy marsh and scattered scraps of oiled paper around its roots to catch the light of the setting sun--and, hopefully, the attention of their pursuers. She crouched down behind the tree and waited.

She expected that whoever was following them would stop to make camp when it was full dark. The sun set completely as Balsa waited, and she was just about to return to Asra to make camp herself when she saw the shadow of someone approaching the tree.

They moved silently, and their stance was wary. Balsa was concerned about the growing darkness. If they failed to notice the paper scraps by the tree, they'd sidestep her trap.

This pursuer--probably a man--had no reason to suspect a trap. She watched the figure turn toward her and begin his slow approach toward the tree. While he was distracted by the paper, Balsa snaked around the tree and got behind him, then knocked him out with her spear.

She was certain that there were at least two, and possibly as many as four, pursuers. Where were the others? She saw no one.

The grass surrounding the trees near her rustled loudly even though there was no wind. The trees around her moved in suddenly and extended their branches around her, trapping her within a small area. The grass at her feet wound around her legs and tried unsuccessfully to trip her.

Balsa was fairly sure that the trees and the grass were illusions, but she didn't know how to restore her ordinary sight as Tanda had done with Shihana's illusion of fire. Balsa stood still with her spear in front of her, cleared her mind, and focused on her breathing. She felt dizzy. Her forehead was covered in a sheen of cold sweat. She tightened her grip on herself and prepared for the coming attack.

Something burst through the trees, moving fast. Balsa body moved reflexively away from it at the same instant that her spear came up and deflected an arrow. Balsa identified the direction the arrow came from, but she didn't have much time before the archer fired again.

She heard the next arrow before she saw it. It pierced the ground at her feet and was rapidly followed by another. Balsa narrowly dodged the third shot, but lost her footing on the muddy ground. She kicked the earth beneath her feet and sprang back up.

The third arrow had grazed her forehead. The wound stung as she got to her feet; blood dripped into her left eye.

Another arrow. Balsa crouched down low to avoid it, then threw her spear hard in the direction of the archer. Another arrow grazed her left shoulder as her spear left her hand. An instant later, Balsa heard her spear make contact with something solid.

Someone groaned from a behind a clump of bushes in front of her. Balsa crawled toward the sound and discovered the archer. Her spear had gone straight into his right arm. He'd tried to move and avoid it; the result was a long gash that extended all the way up his arm. He was curled around himself in pain and did not notice her approach. Balsa gave him a solid roundhouse kick to the head, causing his forehead to slam into his own shin where he laid curled in on himself. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he passed out.

Balsa used her spear to cut the man's bowstring. She crouched down and laid him out flat, being careful not to move his head much. She adjusted his clenched jaw so that he wouldn't bite his tongue. Then she turned her attention to her own injured shoulder.

Balsa probed the fresh wound on her shoulder for depth, and found it to be quite shallow, though still bleeding. She unwound a long piece of twine from around her wrist, put one end of the twine between her teeth, and wound the twine around her shoulder above the injury. She pulled the twine tight, then tied the two ends together to make a tourniquet.

She heard a twig snap and looked up. Asra stood staring at her. She'd heard the fighting and couldn't stand to stay hidden any longer.

"It's all right now," Balsa said. "I defeated them. You can come out."

Asra approached the unconscious man with his face in the mud near the tree and flipped him over. He groaned softly when she moved him. He'd probably come to soon. It was full dark now, so even when he did regain consciousness it would be impossible for him to follow them effectively for a while.

Balsa walked toward Asra. Her fresh arrow wounds smarted at every step. Asra was shaking. Balsa could clearly see the anxiety on her chalk-white face.

"Did you kill them?" Asra whispered.

Balsa put her hand on Asra's shoulder. "No, I didn't." Balsa tentatively reached out and took Asra's hand in hers. Asra smelled her blood and sweat. He breathing was ragged. It was dark and Asra couldn't really see, but it seemed to her like Balsa was crying.

Asra hesitated, then asked, "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," Balsa said quietly. "They barely scratched me."

Scratches weren't a good reason to cry. But she *was* crying. Asra was sure of it.

Chapter 4 - Rotarbal's Nightmare

On the fourth night after Tanda's capture, Sufar visited him alone in his room. When Tanda saw his face, he was startled. It had only been a few days since Tanda had seen him last, but his cheeks were hollow and sunken like he was starving. His eyes seemed to be sinking into his head. The hawk on his shoulder appeared similarly exhausted and worn-out.

Tanda shifted himself to sit upright against the post he was tied to. He was untied a few times a day to relieve himself and eat, but otherwise he was never allowed to leave this room, and only rarely allowed to stray from the post. Even moving a little to sit up made him feel slightly dizzy. He noticed Chikisa sitting with his back against an almost identical post on the opposite side of the room.

Sufar faced Tanda and sat down. He stared at Tanda and said nothing for a long while. At long length, Sufar asked, "Tanda, is Balsa familiar with the town of Shirogai?"

Tanda frowned deeply. Seeing his expression, Sufar laughed.

"I can tell you didn't have time to talk to her about where she was going. Or maybe you're just that good at covering for her. You're not an idiot, Tanda. You know it's in your best interests to help me here. I'm sure you're curious about what's going on, and what Balsa is doing now. I'll tell you all of that if you answer my questions."

Tanda shook his head. "You overestimate me. I freely admit to being enough of an idiot to never sell out Balsa no matter what you offer--and no matter what you threaten me with."

Tanda's habitually kind face was set in grim lines of unshakable determination. Sufar matched his seriousness and said quietly: "I'm not asking you to betray Balsa. We have no use for her. I'd like nothing more than for you and Balsa to wash your hands of this whole affair and

return to your normal lives. I'm sure you'd like to save Balsa from this quagmire before you both get sucked in too deep."

Tanda looked Sufar straight in the eye and searched for hidden meanings behind his words. He smiled.

"I can't think of a single good reason for you to go out of your way to ask me something like that, except for one. Balsa escaped, didn't she? She got away from you. Your daughter boasted to me about the powers of the Kashal, but it seems Balsa's more powerful still. Well, I could have told you that from the start. If she *has* fled to Shirogai, it's enormous. You'll never find her there without help. And so you're at a stalemate. She beat you."

Sufar's eyes flashed briefly with rage, but he quickly composed himself. "There's no point in provoking us, Tanda. You don't need to get me angry to get me to reveal my intentions. As you say, Balsa has eluded us. Though we know the lay of the land better than she does, she managed to scatter us before we could determine her location. We cannot say for sure where she is now."

Sufar leaned in a little closer. "The most remarkable aspect of this whole affair is that she hasn't killed any of us. Not a single one. She has gone out of her way to allow us to live. I suspect she has done us no permanent harm because she knows that we have you. It may be that she desires time to understand the situation better, and intends to return to us as a potential ally, rather than recklessly making herself our enemies."

Tanda's frown became cold and forbidding. He remained silent and looked at Chikisa, who was watching him from the other side of the room. Their eyes met.

Sufar tracked where Tanda was looking, but didn't turn toward Chikisa. "Listen to what I have to say," he said. "Even if you don't agree with it, it should help you understand why we must kill the girl. Her brother should hear our reasons as well."

Sufar bit the pad of his thumb hard enough to draw blood, then smeared his blood on Tanda's forehead. He passed his bleeding thumb

over his own forehead as well. "You're a magic weaver, so I imagine you understand the significance of this," Sufar said. "I can no longer lie to you at all--not without you knowing that I'm lying immediately. If I try to deceive you, you'll feel it in your soul."

Tanda nodded. His soul and Sufar's were now connected by a delicate thread. He couldn't see fully into Sufar's soul with such a weak connection, but he'd easily be able to tell if Sufar was lying.

Sufar switched over from Yogoese to slow Rotan, so that both Tanda and Chikisa would be able to understand him. "I shall tell you one of our ancient legends. Long ago, the nation that became Rota was larger than it is now. That nation was called Rotarbal. It was ruled by a leader that commanded the power of a terrifying god known as Talhamaya. The family that worshiped and celebrated this god the most were of the Tal people; their family name was Shiul. The Shiul family was small, but they had the power to summon Talhamaya into our world. This power passed on through the generations, and the Shiul ruled Rotarbal for more than a hundred years."

Chikisa stirred behind Sufar. Sufar turned to look at him. "A great deal of time has passed since then, but the descendants of the Shiul family are the Tal people of Rota. ‘Tal' means ‘shadow' in their language. They made a vow long ago to never again hold an active role in Rota's government. That is why the Tal people live as they do now."

Sufar turned back to Tanda. "There is another group of people whose role is to ensure that the Tal people never forget their ancient vow. That is who the Kashal are."

Tanda felt something warm, almost hot, reach him through the thread that attached Sufar's soul to his.

"There was a mysterious river that flowed through Rotarbal. It was invisible to ordinary eyes, but a type of blue moss grew near its shores in our world, making it easy to map its course. This river is formed from snow melting off the peaks of the mountains of Noyuk, the world of the gods."

"Noyuk is Nayugu," Tanda muttered unthinkingly in surprise.

Sufar shrugged. "Noyuk, Nayugu, Nayugul--different languages have similar names for the world attached to ours. No one but magic weavers can see it. Some believe that our world and the other world are truly part of the same world and are intimately connected. Others think the clear separation between our worlds exists for a reason. No one really knows--but you're a magic weaver, so I'm sure you know all about this already.

"Anyway, the people of Rotarbal called this other world Noyuk. They believed it had seasons much as our world does, governed by the goddess Afal. In spring, the snow of the mountains of Noyuk melts and creates the river I have spoken of. Afal is the mother of many gods and creations, and she enriches the water of this river with her blessings. When it flows into our world from Noyuk, we receive the river's bounty and its benefits.

"I said before that this river is invisible to all but magic weavers, and this is true. However, its path through our world is obvious. The river carries nutrients that are beneficial to all living things. Even in the far north, along our border with Kanbal, the blue moss that marks the river's course grows in abundance. Animal populations increase throughout the nation whenever the river is flowing. Nothing starves, not even the wolves. Herders can graze livestock in the middle of winter without fearing that their flocks will be attacked.

"However, Talhamaya also lives in this river. She too can go wherever it flows." Sufar started speaking more quietly. "What I tell you now comes from Tal legends. There was a daughter born to the Shiul family. She was raised carefully and happily until the age of sixteen, and was considered very beautiful. One day, while this young woman walked through the woods, she came across a clear woodland spring. Though it was near to winter then, the area surrounding the spring was warm and teeming with life. Monkeys played around it, and birds twittered to one another in the trees.

"That spring is a sacred place where the river of Noyuk overflows and spills into this world. That spring divides into tributaries that flow into the rest of the nation. The young woman saw an enormous tree

growing out of the center of the spring. That spring was invisible to most eyes, even those of magic weavers, but the young woman could clearly see the tree.

"Suddenly, the young woman saw a beautiful ring of mistletoe flowers reflected in the surface of the water of the spring. Each flower was united with the next in a long unbroken chain, and the entire ring glowed with a soft light. It was about the same size and shape as a necklace. She saw it hanging from one of the branches of the tree above.

"The young woman climbed the tree at the center of the spring and took the mistletoe ring from the tree branch. She slipped it over her head like a necklace. At that moment, the mistletoe ring glowed and disappeared into the young woman's body." Sufar's tone became ingratiating. "That's how it all started. By taking the mistletoe ring, that young woman was granted a great and terrible power. The spring was connected to Noyuk, and the tree acted as a bridge between our world and the world of the gods. That spring was the connection point of a river in Noyuk that thirsts constantly for blood--the river of Talhamaya.

"At the young woman's unwitting invitation, Talhamaya flowed into that spring and used the mistletoe ring to slip into our world. Talhamaya used this young woman to cut down all living things in her path. The young woman united with the god to become one being, and lived in youth and beauty unchanged for a hundred years."

Tanda felt a steady sensation of heat coming through the soul thread that connected him and Sufar. He wasn't lying,

"This woman is known to history as Sada Talhamaya. She led the Shiul family in wars against Rotarbal's other clans and tribes, and Rotarbal was united under the Shiul banner in the blink of an eye. No matter her opponent's military strength or skill, Sada Talhamaya was

more than a match for them. When Sada Talhamaya faced an enemy, her rage was like lightning and thunderheads. When she was angry, Talhamaya would appear and cut down people in a whirlwind of blades. Armies fell dead in seconds. And they couldn't hide behind shields or high stone walls, either--Talhamaya could break through them all.

"Eventually, the only clan left aside from the Shiul clan and those they'd subjugated was the Rota clan. The small Shiul clan met the large, well-equipped Rota clan's army on the battlefield. In the blink of an eye, the Rota clan's army was decimated, and the grassland of the battlefield became a sea of blood. The Rota clan surrendered and agreed to be ruled by Sada Talhamaya. This was only the beginning of a nightmarish chapter in our nation's history."

"You're wrong!" Chikisa called out suddenly.

Sufar turned to look at Chikisa with an ashen expression.

"That's just a legend made up by you Rota people to make Tal people look bad," Chikisa said.

Sufar's eyebrows went up in surprise. "What are you trying to imply? You're Tal, so I expect you know this story. Do the Tal people's oral legends differ from what I've said?"

Chikisa shook his head. He had heard this same legend from the Tal Kumada, and they had expressed as clearly as Sufar the ancient crimes that the Shiul family had committed against Rota, to such an extent that Chikisa felt ashamed to be Tal. But now, hearing the man that wanted to kill him and Asra speak ill about his ancestors, Chikisa felt the stirrings of a deep and powerful rage.

Chikisa remembered something his mother had told him, and at the same time remembered that her views and opinions were considered heretical among the Tal. But right he couldn't think of anything else to say to defend himself and Asra. He wasn't used to speaking in front of people, but as soon as he started he couldn't stop.

"Thanks to Sada Talhamaya uniting with the god, Rotarbal's long history of bloody wars ended. She united Rotarbal into one nation under a single ruler for the first time. After she died, Rotarbal went

back to being a nation of warring clans! You people used Sada Talhamaya as a sacrifice to sanctify the first king of Rota, and as an excuse to drive the Tal people into the woods and keep us there forever with your prejudice and hatred!"

Sufar's eyes widened. After a long moment, he nodded. "Hm. I suppose it's reasonable that the Tal people would see things that way. I understand now why your mother violated the ancient agreement of the Tal people with the Rotans and entered the the forbidden forest--why wouldn't she, if that's how your people think?"

Chikisa frowned. Most of the Tal people didn't believe as his mother did. She'd been tried and executed as a heretic--and she'd broken the Tal people's agreement with the Rotans alone and without outside help.

Sufar's eyes never left Chikisa's face. "The first king of Rota, Kiran, did besmirch the reputation of Sada Talhamaya in order to better consolidate his power. That much is true. But aren't you doing the same thing right now by casting your own side in the best possible light while harshly condemning the other?

"You've said that Sada Talhamaya united Rotarbal into a single nation and presided over an age of peace. That's also true. But Sada Talhamaya's reign wasn't peaceful because people were happy, or safe, or prosperous. The people of Rotarbal had peace because they were terrified, and weren't even allowed to scream. Sada Talhamaya could kill anyone with a glance. Do you call that system of oppression through violence ‘peace?'"

"You're lying! Sada Talhamaya was a wise ruler! She was revered by her people as a saint!"

"I'm not lying," Sufar said. "If she really was a wise and gentle ruler, why did her own people kill her?"

"Kiran wanted power for himself," Chikisa said. "He gathered all the power-hungry people in Rotarbal together and assassinated her."

Sufar gave Chikisa a cold smile. "What you're saying doesn't change the facts. She was killed by Kiran; you're right about that--but how? She was united with Talhamaya. Talhamaya was never away from her, not

even for a moment. Sada Talhamaya never slept. She ruled for a hundred years--it was unthinkable that anyone would try to kill her."

Sufar tilted his head to the side and asked Chikisa, "Have you ever heard of the Sul Kashal?"

Chikisa frowned and muttered, "The Sul Kashal were Sada Talhamaya's hunting dogs. The name means ‘dogs of death.'"

Sufar smiled. "The Sul Kashal had a secret that they were sworn to protect at all costs."

"A secret?"

"Yes. We swore an oath, to serve and to watch, and to keep our existence secret from all but a select few. It is likely that you will die soon, so there is little risk in telling you about us. Most of Rota's people will never know anything of what I tell you now. Most of the Tal don't, either.

"Kiran didn't strike the blow that killed Sada Talhamaya on his own. No one could enter the city where Sada Talhamaya lived without being guided in by her hunting dogs, the Sul Kashal. These men and women were my ancestors."

Chikisa blinked in surprise.

"The people that know anything of the Sul Kashal assume that they were ordinary dogs, but this was not the case. The Sul Kashal were not dogs, but magic weavers enslaved to Sada Talhamaya. Then as now, the people of Rota tended to live in caves or holes dug into the grasslands. Most of the common people kept their heads down during the protracted wars between clans, choosing to live in small peaceful settlements and making their living by hunting and fishing.

"The Sul Kashal were a little different. They possessed power over certain elements of nature. They could bind their souls to certain wild animals, traveling vast distances over the plains and woods and sky while looking through borrowed eyes. As animals, they could pass through fields and forests and towns undetected by other people. This power became the cause of our downfall."

Sufar's voice conveyed bitter regret. "Sada Talhamaya realized what they were capable of and took members of their families hostage. That was how she enslaved them. They were ordered to hunt down all who opposed her. It was shameful and disgusting work, but they had no choice. Those that resisted and lived were also made prisoners and slaves. For generations, the Sul Kashal were forced to do this work that they hated.

"You've accused Rota's people of lying about Sada Talhamaya in order to uphold their own reputation. How do you explain the experiences of my ancestors? This tale has been passed down from parent to child with the greatest of care for centuries."

Chikisa's lips trembled, but he remained silent.

"My ancestors passed down what happened to them because they did not wish us to forget. They didn't want their memories to be lost or changed over time. No matter how much time passes, Sada Talhamaya must never again be permitted to ride the current of the sacred river of Noyuk into our world. It was to prevent such a thing from ever happening again that my ancestors engraved this tale on my heart, so that I could recite it clearly from memory." Sufar stopped speaking suddenly. No one else said anything for a long while.

Sufar took a deep breath, then finally broke the silence. "When the current of the sacred river becomes weaker and slower, it is a sign that Noyuk's spring is coming to an end. Sada Talhamaya weakened when the sacred river ceased its flow into our world. She began to sleep for short periods of time. Her health deteriorated, and she showed signs of aging. If the river stopped flowing into this world completely, it was likely that she would die. This is what many people thought would happen.

"But the Sul Kashal could not simply wait and hope that she might die on her own. The Shiul clan was still small in numbers, if not in influence. The Sul Kashal were afraid that Sada Talhamaya might use her last strength to exterminate the other clans in order to protect her family's position. But the Sul Kashal's numbers were also few, and they

held no role nor interest in politics. They also knew that killing Sada Talhamaya themselves would send the country into chaos and confusion, and they had no desire to be the ones to put the country back together again. They also lacked the strength to perform such an act by themselves.

"While my ancestors deliberated, the people of Rotarbal decided to assist them. The most popular leader among them was a young man, Kiran. The Sul Kashal communicated with Kiran's supporters secretly, telling them that Sada Talhamaya was weakening, and that they feared she might kill them all.

"Sada Talhamaya lived in a city deep within the forest, protected by her clan and many priests; the Sul Kashal would not be able to infiltrate the city without being discovered. Nonetheless, the Sul Kashal decided to make the attempt.

"They encountered unexpected allies." Sufar's expression became difficult to interpret. He stared right at Chikisa as he said, "I expect that you know this part of the story. Your ancestors were our allies--the Shiul clan, and the priests and attendants that served them."

Chikisa clamped his mouth shut and said nothing.

"The Shiul clan had benefited a great deal from Sada Talhamaya's long rule. You would expect them to love and protect her. But most of them were sick of serving her. She was a cold, cruel, unfeeling god. Human lives were as fragile as soap bubbles to her, and as worthless. Her servants grew tired of placating her anger and trying to prevent her from further slaughter. If you consider the situation from their perspective, their position was perhaps the most precarious in the entire kingdom. They were around her all the time."

Sufar continued his narration in a detached tone. "When the priests surrounding Sada Talhamaya noticed her growing weakness, they consulted among themselves. When the sacred river stopped flowing into our world, Talhamaya would have no way to remain here. She would be cut off and stuck in Noyuk. The priests considered what they would do when that happened.

With the god gone, the Rota clan would rise up. It was likely that they'd start another war. Sada Talhamaya knew this, too. It was possible that she would kill the entire Rota clan as her final act, to protect her kingdom from destruction." Sufar shook his head a little. "Chikisa, your ancestors made a very important decision that saved many lives. They joined their fate and their future to the Rota clan, choosing to turn away from Sada Talhamaya. They could not sit by and condone the atrocity of another mass killing. They knew they would have to kill her in order to prevent her from killing anyone else."

Chikisa was listening attentively to Sufar now. He'd never heard the legend of Sada Talhamaya from the perspective of the Sul Kashal before. He knew about most of what Sufar was saying because of the teachings passed down to the Tal people from the Tal Kumada, but there were significant differences between the version of the story he knew and Sufar's.

"The Sul Kashal guided Kiran into the sacred forest surrounding the city where Sada Talhamaya lived," Sufar said. "They were met by the priests of the Shiul clan. The Sul Kashar served at Sada Talhamaya's side, so they knew when she was about to sleep for a time and agreed to relay this information to the priests. The Sul Kashal promised to assist with the assassination in exchange for the promise that the Shiul clan would not wage war on the rest of Rotarbal after Sada Talhamaya's death.

"Kiran didn't agree with this plan at first. Many of the Shiul clan were able to see the sacred river flowing from Noyuk, and some were able to see the sacred tree at the center of the spring where Sada Talhamaya had first gained her power. Kiran feared that one of the Shiul clan would unite with Talhamaya again."

Sufar wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and continued, "So the Shiul priests swore that they would never again invite Talhamaya into our world, nor would they allow others to do so. They knew as well as the Sul Kashal did the terror of being subjugated by Sada Talhamaya, and they never wanted anyone to live in fear of her ever again. They decided to throw away their family name and become Tal, which means

‘shadow.' They promised to never again seek political power and to live quietly in Rota's forests. These priests eventually became the first Tal Kumada; they guided the Sul Kashal and Kiran in sealing Talhamaya away in Noyuk.

"However, Kiran still could not be convinced to work with the Shiul clan." Sufar pursed his lips. "That is when the Sul Kashal swore to keep watch over them, to ensure that they would keep their word. They had no wish for a war between factions. Enough blood had been spilled already. And so they vowed that they would watch and observe the Shiul clan forever, passing their knowledge and their oath to all further generations of their people. If Kiran agreed to these terms, the Sul Kashal promised to make him the first king of the new nation of Rota.

"Kiran finally accepted these terms. The Sul Kashal accepted their role of ensuring that the Tal people kept their promises--and that their connection to Talhamaya remained broken.

"I am of the Kashal, and we preserve our ancient vow even now.

"And that is what I know of the origins of the Sul Kashal, the royal family of Rota, and the Tal people." He took a long breath. "You can guess what happened next. The assassination of Sada Talhamaya was successful. Apparently, she screamed before she died--she was aware of what was happening--but Kiran and my ancestors were not cut down. Her body turned transparent after she died, becoming all but invisible except to a handful of the Shiul priests. The mistletoe ring around her neck completely disappeared.

"But like a tree sprouting from a seed, my ancestors knew that Noyuk's spring would come again and create the potential for Talhamaya to cross into our world once more. Fearing the future wrath of Talhamaya, the Shiul priests built temples dedicated to her and and tried to sate her rage with the blood of many sacrifices. Sada Talhamaya's grave became a forbidden place, and was heavily guarded. No one was permitted to approach the grave.

"After her death, the Sul Kashal, the Rota clan, and the Shiul clan all kept their word. The Shiul priests guided their people into the deep

woods and became Tal. Kiran became the first king of the new and peaceful nation of Rota."

Sufar sighed heavily. He was still looking at Chikisa. "Do you understand, Chikisa? Your ancestors made a promise to my ancestors to never let Talhamaya enter this word ever again. They agreed that if a Tal person ever did attempt to invite the god to use them as a vessel, they would hand that person immediately over to us, the Kashal."

Chikisa's eyes opened wide. He shook all over.

"That's right. The Tal Kumada handed your mother over to us. When they told us that she'd made her way secretly to Sada Talhamaya's grave, we were shocked. But the Tal Kumada also told us that she had no capacity for magic weaving and was not able to invite Talhamaya into our world, even if she wanted to. That eased our minds somewhat. We thought her foolish act puzzling and disturbing, but harmless, in the end."

Sufar's face twisted in a frown. "That was my mistake. I underestimated her. But I'm a cautious man. Even after I handed you and your mother over to Rota's soldiers, I ordered archers to keep her in their sights all the way to Shintadan."

The memory of that terrible morning flashed before Chikisa's eyes. His hands balled into fists.

"I thought your mother might be dangerous, but Talhamaya never appeared. That also eased my mind."

"Then why did you kill my mom?" Chikisa asked in a strangled voice.

Sufar looked at Chikisa with an expression of pain. "By violating the ancient pact between our peoples, your mother committed a terrible crime. Even if she were a child, her punishment would have been the same."

Tears welled up in Chikisa's eyes.

"I didn't consider the idea that the Chamau was your sister and not your mother. That was a grave error on my part." Sufar continued speaking in a softer tone of voice. "We still have time to act, so long as

Asra remains unconscious. She hasn't united with the god yet, and Noyuk's spring has only just begun. Asra is powerful now, but her power resembles Sada Talhamaya's when the flow of the sacred river into our world lessened. While Asra's power remains immature, it should be possible to kill her." Sufar closed his mouth sharply. Grief and regret swirled together in the depths of his heart.

"When the Kashal learned that the sacred river was flowing again, we bound our souls to dogs and sent them to observe Shintadan prison fortress. When we saw Asra through their eyes, we knew immediately that she was a Chamau--a person with the ability to invite and become united with Talhamaya. But even after we knew this to be the case, we hesitated and did not kill her. She is so young...we thought to provide her some kind of path forward, so that she might live. But our weakness resulted in that terrible massacre."

Sufar stared at the floor. The lines in his face were deep, accentuating his clear exhaustion.

The rage boiling inside Chikisa burned to ashes. He felt like a withered tree with the core burned out. The ashes that remained only made him sad, not angry. Chikisa remembered how utterly terrifying Asra had been at Shintadan, and at the inn after that. If everything Sufar said was true, what could he do? Was it true that Asra carried the seed of some terrible disaster within her?

Tanda glanced over at Chikisa, then faced Sufar.

Sufar met his eyes, and Tanda said in Rotan, "Sufar. Is that the end of your explanation? Have you told us all the reasons why you want to kill Asra?"

Sufar frowned a little. "Were you expecting something else? Do you *need* other reasons?"

Tanda nodded.

Sufar frowned deeply. "Hm. I see. My ancestors told me what I have related to you, and I hold it to be completely true--but I can understand why you might not. No one really knows what happened in the past, therefore no one can claim to know the truth, not for certain. Perhaps

you think my ancestors crafted the details of this legend to suit their purposes, and that Chikisa's version of events holds equal validity. It all comes down to whose word you trust."

"Sada Talhamaya's power to subdue and subjugate her people has historical precedent." Tanda's tone was calm and even. "In New Yogo, the Mikado is said to have the power to strike common people dead instantly if they look him in the eyes. The Mikado and his family claim that this power comes from a god.

"More importantly, when you first saw Asra through the eyes of the dogs, you wanted to find a way to let her live. Isn't there still a way for her to do that?"

Tanda and Sufar stared at one another for a long time.

A light like hope shone in Chikisa's eyes. "Asra really is a good person." Chikisa's voice was as thin as a thread about to snap. "She doesn't want to kill people."

Sufar shrugged. "You're probably right. But her personality doesn't change the current situation at all. She has the potential to shift the balance of power in Rota. That wouldn't just be destabilizing; it would be ruinous. We must consider how to prevent such a catastrophe."

Sufar faced Chikisa. "You saw it. Didn't you? You saw it all. Everything your sister did. You know the kind of power she wields. I understood it immediately as soon as I saw the carnage at Shintadan. Killing even one person is a serious crime, and she killed dozens. She must pay the price for their lives."

Sufar kept his focus solely on Chikisa as he continued, "You claim that your sister is good and kind and has no desire to kill, but all those lives at Shintadan were lost because of her--and lost cruelly, and mercilessly. Why should we let her live? Simply because she is young? Because her actions are partially the fault of a god?"

Chikisa didn't answer.

"If we leave this situation alone, Asra will almost certainly kill again," Sufar said bitterly. "Do you care nothing for the lives of others?"

"It's cruel to ask Chikisa that," Tanda cut in.

Sufar turned toward Tanda, eyes flashing. "Cruel? Compared to what? I'm trying to prevent more needless killing. And look at you! You can't do anything at all. You're nothing but a hostage. By refusing to help us, you're all but helping this girl murder more people."

Sufar's face was bright red. "Why can't you understand that there's no way to save her? If she really is a good person, she'd choose death herself--isn't that better than allowing Talhamaya to kill countless others? Think of the future. It will be like our nation's past, full of atrocity and fear. Is that what you want?"

Tanda clenched his fists and stared at the floor. He lifted his head slowly and looked into Sufar's eyes. "Why not give Asra that choice? Tell her everything you just told us. Maybe she'll choose to sacrifice herself to save others. We can't rule that out unless we ask her first, can we? Or maybe Asra could spend her life in New Yogo, far away from the sacred river--she might not be able to access Talhamaya's power there.

"If Asra decides to live, I'll take full responsibility for her."

Sufar shook his head. "Impossible. We have no idea what would happen if we entrusted Asra to you. I know that your offer is serious, but I'm not sure you've thought through all the implications of what taking responsibility for Asra would mean."

"Yes I have," Tanda said. "If Asra kills anyone else--if I can't stop her--you can kill me. I'm sure Balsa would say the same thing. I can't just stand by and watch Asra be killed. But if I'm mistaken about her and she does kill again, you can kill me--me and Balsa both. If Asra becomes Sada Talhamaya, she won't be Asra anymore."

Tanda turned toward Chikisa. "What do you think? Would you stay near your sister and protect her for the rest of your life?"

Chikisa hesitated, but he nodded.

Tanda said to Sufar in Yogoese: "What'll it be, Sufar? He current situation's still a stalemate. If you don't accept my conditions, I swear I'll never tell you where Balsa is, even if you kill me."

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Shihana looked up at Sufar when he entered the room. Mark and Kahal were asleep in the next room. Mark had helped the severely injured Kahal descend the mountain and reach this inn only a little while ago. They were both utterly exhausted; Shihana had only just finished seeing to their wounds.

Sufar collapsed to the floor in a heap, clearly exhausted himself. "I have an idea where Balsa and Asra may be hiding."

As Sufar told Shihana what he'd learned from Tanda, her face lit up. "All right. As soon as Mark recovers, we'll get rid of Tanda and head for Shirogai."

Sufar shook his head. He spoke slowly, as if he had to push the words out by force of will. "We're bringing Tanda and Chikisa to Shirogai with us. We'll decide whether or not to kill the girl after we've found her."

"Huh? Why, dad?"

"It's Tanda's condition for telling us where they are," Sufar said. "We'll go to Shirogai together, and figure things out from there."

Shihana let out a brief, sarcastic laugh. "Unbelievable. Dad, is your head feeling all right? We have the information we need; there's no need to honor your word with a prisoner."

Sufar stared straight at Shihana. "I think it's best for everyone if we keep to this agreement. I was entirely prepared to kill the girl, and kill her quickly. Tanda could feel this through my soul thread--when he understood my conviction, he gave me his terms. I think he understands the situation we're in."

Shihana opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. Her expression conveyed a complicated mix of emotions. After a long, silent moment, she nodded her head in acknowledgment. Her father led the Kashal, and she had to respect his will. She sighed.

Part Three

Chapter 1 - Black Sheep

The late autumn weather was unseasonably--but pleasantly--warm. Pale sunlight shone over the walls of Rota's capital city. All of the clan leaders were currently together in the palace's main hall for Ramal Han, the autumn gathering for the leaders of Rota. At Ramal Han, Rota's leaders set up temporary residence in the capital to celebrate the year's harvest and collect and count the year's taxes. The three powerful and wealthy southern clan lords were in attendance, as well as their poorer cousins from the north. Supply and travel wagons lined the streets leading up to the palace for miles.

The capital of Rota had been built in the middle of the south's rolling grasslands. It seemed to spring out of the ground out of nowhere like a mirage. The city was surrounded by strong outer walls, and in its very center the royal palace towered majestically over all the other buildings. The palace was surrounded by the magnificent villas and estates of the other lords of Rota.

Merchants that plied their trade within the city walls paid high taxes, but received the protection of the king and his guards at no additional charge. Merchants that sold their goods outside the walls had no such protection. These tended to be poorer or lower-class merchants, but even these gave the general impression that they were thriving. They got plenty of business from people entering and leaving the city.

On this bright, warm autumn day, the assembled clan lords of Rota gathered in the main hall of the royal palace around a large oval table in the presence of King Yosam and Prince Ihan. Eight large windows opened out into the courtyard below the hall, letting in plenty of clear sunlight. A slight breeze passed gently over the flowers decorating each corner of the room.

King Yosam of Rota looked out at the assembled personages sitting around the table from his jeweled throne. His face was red from his repeated rebukes to the southern clan lords, who were all looking at him with resentful expressions.

"About what you have said, King Yosam," the southern clan lord Aman said. He was incredibly fat, and his low voice came out like the sound of grunting. "All taxes should be equally levied. Imposing higher taxes on the wealthy discourages people from working their hardest to achieve more for themselves. You seek to punish our people for being successful. You may think me presumptuous, but I vehemently oppose increasing taxes in the south."

The other two southern lords nodded in agreement.

"I have told you that the epidemic among our northern mahan sheep has caused great hardship this year," King Yosam said calmly and quietly. "I have no choice but to raise the taxes."

Aman leaned forward. "Then you must raise them in the north as well. Don't make the south shoulder all of the north's burden. It wouldn't be fair."

The young leader of the northern clan of Yan, whose name was Rahan, glared threateningly at Aman. "Lord Aman," he said in a clipped tone, "please consider--"

"Be quiet," Aman snapped, cutting off Rahan. "I am addressing His Majesty King Yosam."

The northern clan lords started whispering to one another. Rahan, enraged, leaped to his feet. Prince Ihan stood up at the same time.

"Be silent." Ihan did not speak loudly, but his voice carried to the very edges of the hall. "Lord Aman. You are inside the main hall of the royal palace in the presence of the king. Every lord in the king's service is deserving of equal respect. You have no more authority than any other clan lord present."

Aman nodded courteously, but his eyes showed clear contempt. "Excuse my outburst. What did you wish to say, lord Rahan?"

Rage blazed in Rahan's eyes as he faced Aman. He took a deep breath and said, "It is as King Yosam told you. The north has suffered greatly from the epidemic of plague that killed most of our mahan sheep. You in the south can use your savings to pay increased taxes, but the north has no capital to draw on. We would be forced to choose between paying the taxes and feeding our people. We cannot do both. If our taxes increase this year, many of our people will starve. The tax's effect will not be equal."

The other northern clan lords broke into simultaneous applause. The southern lords visibly deflated. The southern lords gathered around Aman and spoke to one another in hushed tones.

A short while later, Aman addressed the king again. "King Yosam, please consider this matter very carefully. Do not forget the power and influence of those who support you. It would certainly be unfortunate if the north starved this winter, but what you propose still places an undue burden upon us. If you go through with this unfair increased taxation policy, do not expect us or the people of the south to forget it."

King Yosam's eyes flashed. "Lord Aman, is that a threat? Do you presume to lecture me about national politics?"

Aman flinched and went pale. Yosam was calm by nature, but he was capable of intimidation when it suited his purposes. The atmosphere in the hall intensified as all the clan lords looked to Yosam.

"No," Aman said in a voice no louder than a whisper. "I would never presume to do such a thing, Your Majesty."

Another of the southern lords, Suan, stood up and said, "Perhaps lord Aman should consider the courteousness of his speech with more care, but that's no reason for us to get angry with one another," he said in a conciliatory tone. His voice was thin and wispy from age.

King Yosam looked directly at lord Suan as he spoke. "The people of the north are Rotan citizens. You cannot expect me to permit them to starve. If increasing taxes in the south will save lives in the north, I have no other choice but to do so."

Aman looked toward Suan, who hadn't finished speaking. "By making us spend so much now, you'll be limiting our ability to invest in future progress," Suan said. "Ordinarily, such a proposal would be accompanied by some form of collateral or hope of return on investment. Your Highness Prince Ihan just affirmed everyone's equal right to speak, but shouldn't those that support the financial well-being of this country have more of a say than those that don't, or can't? Am I wrong, King Yosam?"

The hall was dead silent for a moment; then all the lords started speaking at once. Ihan picked up his short spear and slammed its stone tip into the floor of the hall. The room fell silent once more.

Ihan glared at Suan. "I'm not sure I understand what you're trying to imply, lord Suan," Ihan said in a tone of tightly controlled anger. "Are you suggesting that the people of the north are second-class citizens and not as valuable to our nation as the people of the south? You would put a material, monetary worth on people's lives?"

Suan shrugged. "As you say."

"At least consider the continued peace of our nation! The inequality between the north and the south is already severe. The south has trade routes with other nations and access to industries and trades that aren't available in the north. The north's winters are long and cold. Much of the land is completely barren. The circumstances of the north and south were unequal from the start. Saying that people who have more money should have more rights is in no way a reflection of fairness.

"And if you and the southern clan lords try to seize more power using solely material wealth as a basis, you will tear this country in half. Your words reflect an unrepentant disregard and disrespect for our people and your king, lord Suan. What you suggest would endanger the lives and safety of the entire nation."

Suan didn't say anything in reply. He simply looked at Ihan with a resigned and vaguely patronizing expression. After a long pause, he shook his head. "We of the south are not the ones endangering this

country. I will put things in terms that the northern clan lords will understand. The north is an emaciated flock of sheep being devoured by wolves. That's all it is. That's all it's ever been. It is a threat to the larger nation of Rota. Foreign nations may seek to exploit its clear weakness to destroy us all."

Suan fixed his faintly shining eyes on Yosam. "You say you must increase the taxes, Your Majesty. Very well. But you should give us something in return. In exchange for allowing you to weaken the economic bargaining power of the south, permit us to open Tsuram harbor to the Talsh empire for trade.

"The kingdom of Sangal currently holds all the rights to trade directly with the southern continent and does not intend to share its monopoly. However, paying Sangal's taxes on southern goods as well as your increased taxes will bleed us dry. We need another revenue source. Establishing a direct trade route with the Talsh will also grant the entire country increased access to the wealth of the south. The north would gain a trading partner for its wool and furs. We have nothing to fear diplomatically from the Talsh, so there should be no reason to deny this request."

The northern and southern clan lords consulted among themselves. The sound of negotiations passing back and forth echoed through the hall. Ihan slammed his stone spear point into the floor again, and the lords fell silent once more.

"You have already made this request several times, lord Suan," King Yosam said. "The proposal certainly seems attractive, at least on its surface. But what would the Talsh empire gain from trading with us? Why would they wish to trade with a comparatively poor nation that is so far away from them? I see no way that trading with us would benefit the Talsh at all."

The hall was silent except for Yosam's voice. "The Talsh empire does not desire trade. They desire to gain a foothold on the northern continent to make it easier to invade. The southern continent is a warlike place. The Talsh empire has devoured the nations surrounding

it in order to survive. I do not imagine that they will deal gently or honestly with us.

"Lord Suan proposes a trade agreement so that when the Talsh empire comes with their warships, we will be unguarded and undefended, and fall to them without a fight. Isn't that right? Isn't this agreement all just some scheme contrived by the Talsh empire to deceive us? You must consider not just how this proposal would affect our nation, but the entire northern continent.

"Consider Sangal. A trade agreement between us and the Talsh would strain our diplomatic relationship with Sangal as well as weaken Sangal's economic power and influence. Sangal is the bridge between the northern and southern continents, and it is essential that we maintain our alliance with them and keep their nation strong in our defense against the warlike south.

"If the Talsh empire managed to drive a wedge between Rota and Sangal, that would weaken Sangal--perhaps enough for them to conquer it. In one stroke, the Talsh empire would have built their bridge to the north. Have you considered any of this at all, lord Suan?"

Yosam wasn't angry; he appeared tired and vaguely disappointed. "I expect that the Talsh empire won't give up. They'll offer us increasingly favorable terms. If I may borrow your previous analogy, lord Suan, I would liken the Talsh empire to a pack of ravening wolves intent on devouring the entire nation whole. Their trade deal is an attempt to fatten us up before they slaughter us. If our country is going to be strong enough to stand against them, we must stand united."

King Yosam's voice remained measured and quiet. "I do not believe I owe the south any form of collateral or payment in exchange for raising taxes. I will not place unequal burdens on anyone. The south will pay its increased taxes to help the north survive the winter. That is the only fair outcome."

The faces of the southern lords clouded over, but the northern clan lords all looked toward Yosam with expressions of hope.

"One more thing," Yosam said. "I have been considering ways to make the wealth shared between the north and the south more equal. To that end, it is my royal decree that the northern clan lords shall immediately increase their populations of shahan sheep in order to better protect against further outbreaks of the plague that devastated their flocks of mahan sheep this year."

The smiles on the faces of the northern lords stiffened. "Shahan? You want us to increase the numbers of such dirty, useless sheep?"

The southern lords smiled coldly at one another as they took in this new development. The northern clan lords, especially the older ones, looked at Prince Ihan and King Yosam with clear expressions of consternation.

The oldest of the northern lords, Nigiri, rasped out, "First of all, when Prince Ihan brought this proposal to us for the first time many years ago, we were all quite clear on our opinion of such a policy. Shahan are easy to breed. If we go through with this decree, the dirty sheep will be the dominant breed in Rota."

Rahan looked toward Nigiri and said, "Lord Nigiri, you say that shahan are dirty, but they still represent increased wealth in Rota. If we stay as we are, the north will continue to be terribly poor. I, for one, support the royal decree."

The northern lords began arguing. The southern lords watched them with gleeful, condescending smiles. King Yosam, still seated on his throne, felt hateful eyes glaring at him. The lords continued fighting about rights, greed, prejudice and selfishness, flinging accusations back and forth across the hall. Ihan became well and truly angry--almost angry enough to yell at his brother to do something about this mess.

It was traditional for the clan lords to show a great deal more respect for the king of Rota than they were showing now. Ihan knew that Yosam would have the last word here, but he grew impatient waiting to hear his opinion. He was sure Yosam would be able to quell this chaos with a single word; he could be intimidating and even

threatening when he needed to be. Ihan wished that he'd use his wisdom and authority to directly improve the country more often.

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That night, Ihan was summoned to Yosam's private study. The study was far removed from the chaos and noise of the main palace, situated along the rear wall in a corner that was not much frequented by people. Yosam lifted his eyes from the book he was reading as Ihan entered. He smiled.

Yosam sat before a fireplace with a richly carved mantelpiece. The chair was large and plush enough for Yosam to sit cross-legged in it is he so desired. The book he was reading was open in his lap. Seeing Yosam like this was familiar and comforting to Ihan; Yosam had done most of his reading in this room since he and Ihan were children.

Reading was usually restorative to Yosam, but today he appeared unusually weary.

"Yosam, you did it!" Ihan said in an encouraging tone. "I'm sorry my proposal to increase the shahan sheep population dragged the meeting out for so long, though..."

Yosam shook his head. "You know as well as I that there are always disagreements of that sort during Ramal Han. There's no need for you to apologize. I am troubled by...something else, which I've just heard."

"What is it? Something from the southern lords?"

"Nothing so predictable." Yosam offered Ihan the seat across from him. Ihan sat, then watched Yosam pour him a cup of wine and place it on a side table.

"News has reached me of the terrible massacre at Shintadan."

"Ah! You've had news from Sufar and the Kashal?"

"No. Sufar has not yet sent word. The Tal Kumada took it upon themselves to investigate the peculiar deaths. All the victims had their throats slit or ripped out, if you recall. It is the Tal Kumada's report that concerns me."

Ihan remained silent and waited for Yosam to go on.

"The Tal Kumada report that the Hasal Ma Talhamaya--the river that flows out of the other world, and which can carry Talhamaya into ours--started flowing again, just before the Shintadan massacre. The Tal Kumada are able to see the other world, so they immediately sensed that the river was flowing again. They meant to send word as soon as they'd made this discovery, but then Shintadan happened. They wished to be sure of the full scope of the situation before submitting their report.

"And now they have," Yosam said with a sigh. "It's a warning."

"A warning? About what?"

"They believe that Talhamaya has entered our world."

Ihan blinked. "Talhamaya...daughter of the goddess Afal? A demonic goddess that is constantly hungry for blood?" Ihan understood where people's fear of such a god came from, but he also had a fair amount of skepticism when it came to gods.

Yosam nodded at Ihan. "I recognize that look. I didn't believe it when I first heard it, either."

Yosam put on his calm, composed manner, and began speaking as if he were addressing the assembled clan lords. "One of the walls of Shintadan fortress has a deep, carved gash that cut through it most of the way. The walls are made of stone, as you know--and inside the carved-out hollow of the gash was a strange substance, like butter or fat. The people who died there were cut down in a radial pattern from a central point. That central point was an executed Tal woman."

Yosam noticed Ihan frowning and paused. Ihan nodded at him to continue.

"That woman went secretly to the grave of Sada Talhamaya inside the ancient Tal capital city. She invited the god to use her as a vessel in our world. It was a grave crime that she committed."

Ihan's eyebrows drew together. He had a bad feeling about what was coming next.

"So, here are the matters that are weighing on my mind. One: The river that can bring a terrifying god into our world is flowing again. Two: A woman violated an ancient prohibition and disturbed Sada Talhamaya's grave, and was sentenced to death. Three: The corpses at Shintadan surrounded that woman's body, almost like she was the cause of the tragedy."

Ihan stared at Yosam with his mouth hanging open slightly.

Yosam nodded. "I see you understand me. I believe that woman was successful when when she invited Talhamaya into our world. It seems impossible, but the more I think about it, the more I think that it explains everything." A shiver went up Yosam's spine. Ihan seemed as shocked as he was--and as convinced. But there was still a chance that they were mistaken.

"It won't do anything to restore the lives that have been lost," Yosam said, "but the Tal Kumada did honor our ancient agreement, at least. They sent the Kashal after the woman as soon as they learned of her crime. They caught her and handed her over to the executioners. It is possible that with her dead, Talhamaya no longer has the ability to exert her bloodthirsty power in our world.

"If so, we are fortunate to have put an end to the situation so quickly, despite how horrific Shintadan was. We must never let something so terrible happen ever again." Yosam's expression became difficult to read. He looked Ihan in the eyes and said, "But...we don't know for sure yet if Talhamaya is gone."

Ihan nodded and didn't speak.

Yosam sighed. "We preserve records and legends of the past for the purpose of guiding Rota through hardships such as this. Our family's problems don't end with politics and trade." The corners of Yosam's lips twitched upward. "We must convey our thanks to the Tal Kumada and the Kashal. They have preserved many records of Talhamaya and worked tirelessly to ensure that she would never return. It is entirely thanks to them that I was able to deduce what must have happened at Shintadan. I understand that they pass their traditions down from parent to child, and have done so in an unbroken line for hundreds of years. They have demonstrated their good faith in honoring our old agreements, and in maintaining their vigilance for so long."

Members of Rota's royal family learned many secrets when they came of age, among them the secret of the ancient pact between the royal family, the Tal Kumada, and the Kashal. The Kashal had preserved the most information about Talhamaya, since they'd passed down firsthand accounts of Sada Talhamaya's reign to their children. The royal family of Rota deferred to the Kashal in all matters pertaining to Talhamaya.

The Kashal were a very strange people. They lived on the banks of a large river in small huts and worked mainly as farmers and fishermen. They were for the most part a quiet and peaceful people, much like the Tal. But whenever one of their children was discovered to have a talent for magic weaving, that child was sent away to receive a strict education in the ancient arts of their people.

Most Rota commoners believed that all of the Kashal were magic weavers. They thought the Kashal went around saving people from curses and evil spirits--but this wasn't entirely true. For one thing, most

of the Kashal people were entirely ordinary; for another, they had other duties to attend to aside from magic weaving. In part because of their ancient agreements with the royal family of Rota, the Kashal people often lived in greater poverty and isolation than even the Tal.

It was king Kiran that originally called these people "Kashal." He had used them to investigate unrest and disturbance inside and outside the country. The Kashal were uniquely suited to this task because they could see Noyuk as well as the ordinary world. King Kiran had laid down the precepts that were still used when the Rota royal family called upon the Kashal for assistance. The Rota royal family and the priests that served them deferred to the Kashal in all matters involving Noyuk and magic weaving, while the Kashal supported the royal family by investigating political and social unrest.

"The memory of the terrifying god is a distant one for most of our people," Yosam said. "Up until now, whenever the Hasal Ma Talhamaya began to flow into our world, the Tal Kumada have given us clear warning and have prevented the god from returning. The basis for all of our current internal alliances are rooted in the legend of Sada Talhamaya."

Ihan nodded. "I think the immediate danger may be past, but I'd like to know more about this Hasal Ma Talhamaya river. Is it still flowing into our world, or did it stop after the woman was executed?"

"It is still flowing," Yosam said. "It brings the blessings of Afal into our world as well. The god can only be invited to come to our world by a specific person, so from our perspective the river is largely beneficial.

"To the Tal people, the river holds an additional layer of significance. If they could invite Talhamaya back into our world, they would be able to overthrow the current government and return to influence and power."

Fear suddenly seized Ihan's heart. He understood just how close Rota had been to such a terrifying possibility--and so recently. The shadow of the Tal woman he still loved rose up in his memories. He couldn't fear or hate the Tal in a pure, uncomplicated way; all of this

feelings toward them would always be softened by love. Ihan wanted the country to be at peace not only for the Rotan people, but for the Tal people as well.

"Yosam, we have to be careful here. We must increase our vigilance over the Tal people so that we can make sure one faction doesn't stage a rebellion. We must also do all we can to protect the Tal people from any rumors of insurrection or uprising, through Talhamaya or otherwise. If the people of Rotal believe that the Tal people are planning a rebellion on such a vast scale, they may start killing them indiscriminately.

"I don't know how the Tal Kumada feel about all this, but I don't think that all of the Tal people want to use Talhamaya to restore their people to their former glory. I refuse to believe that."

"This isn't something you need to explain to me," Yosam said. "You know I agree with you. I've given strict orders to our high priests and the Tal Kumada not to release any information about what happened at Shintadan to the common people."

Yosam reached out and rested his hand on Ihan's shoulder. "I know that you are genuinely concerned for the Tal people wish to aid them as much as possible. I have always valued that part of you. The Tal people cannot remain as they are, impoverished and scorned, without destabilizing the country. I have been thinking of ways to ease their social burden and increase their wealth.

"But, Ihan--my little brother. We are balancing on a tightrope, the two of us. Doing anything to help the Tal people will frustrate and anger the other people of Rota, making our position even more precarious. We must maintain the balance between all the factions in our nation, or we will fall off the tightrope into the abyss. Do you understand?"

Ihan placed his hand on top of Yosam's on his shoulder and nodded deeply.

Chapter 2 - Clothed in Flowers

Balsa and Asra arrived at the back service entrance of a clothing shop in Shirogai at sunset. The door to the back entrance was wide open, revealing a garden behind it bathed in the golden light of early evening. The garden was scrupulously well-tended.

The area surrounding the back service entrance was completely quiet, entirely unlike the front entrance that faced the main road. Balsa saw people darting back and forth across the garden and into the shop through the open door in front of her and Asra.

The front of the store featured splendid new items for sale, but the back door was clearly a relic of a bygone era. The figure of a flower was carved into its wood; the image of this specific flower was believed to bring luck and good fortune, and revealed that this store belonged to an established family in the area.

A boy stood in front of the back service entrance, keeping watch. He regarded Balsa and Asra with a dubious expression as they approached. Balsa carried a large bundle of bamboo wrapped in thick layers of cloth that might be taken for handwork by an uncritical eye. To the boy, Balsa appeared to be a mother coming to sell her crafted goods at the store--but her face didn't resemble the little girl's at all.

"Do you have some business here?" the boy asked politely, in simple terms. Choosing to deal with customers forthrightly instead of pompously or highhandedly was a hallmark of this store.

"Yes," Balsa said. "Does Martha Samada live here?"

"You have some business with the owner of the store?"

"I would be very happy to see her, if possible," Balsa said. "My name is Balsa."

The boy nodded, then rang a small bell attached to the handle of the back door. A young boy that appeared to be around ten years old came running toward them. The boy watching the back service entrance

whispered something in his ear; he nodded and dashed off in the direction of the store.

A short time later, a sliding door that led to the store's kitchen opened. A small, slight woman crossed the flagstones paving the garden path until she reached the back entrance. When she saw Balsa, she smiled.

Martha Samada was a middle-aged woman with silver-white hair and a dignified air. She wore her hair completely up. Her clothing was simple, but extremely well-made.

"Balsa!" She grinned widely, but didn't say another word. She looked Balsa in the eyes, then extended her arm so that it hovered above Balsa's shoulders in a gesture of protection as she guided Balsa and Asra through the store's back entrance.

"Let's do proper greetings and introductions later," Martha said. "Please come in and make yourselves at home. That includes you, little miss."

Balsa put Asra down. Asra had never seen a Yogo-style store before, and she was clearly captivated by the bright colors and unfamiliar

sights and smells. She forgot her exhaustion as she followed after Balsa and Martha, looking avidly at everything she passed.

Martha didn't lead them into the main store. Instead, she took them to a detached structure along the eastern end of the property. It looked like a house used to welcome and entertain guests. They went inside, and Martha showed them into a main room. This guest house had a main living area, a bedroom, a kitchen, and a full bathroom. There was no one else inside when Martha, Balsa and Asra entered.

Martha asked Balsa to take a seat. When she complied, Martha sat across from her and leaned forward, staring intensely at her face. "You're hurt," she said. "Where?"

Balsa smiled at her. Her arrow wounds had stopped bleeding quite some time ago, and her hair hid the gash on her forehead. She'd also washed the blood out of her clothes before reaching Shirogai. Most people wouldn't guess that she was injured at all, but Martha still had the ability to see right through her.

Martha had always been perceptive. Her eyes could discern the finest details of whatever she saw and make quick judgments based on that information. This ability helped her greatly in managing her prosperous store.

"Your eyes are as sharp as ever, Martha. I'm injured, but only a little."

"Show me."

Balsa shook her head. "We can't stay here long. I'm sorry if I cause you any trouble--we're being followed. I only came to buy new clothes and change in privacy, so that we can pass through Shirogai unnoticed--"

Martha interrupted Balsa's words with an irritated cutting gesture of her hand. "It doesn't matter if you're being followed," Martha said. "You need medical attention, food, and rest. Take a look at that poor child. She's sick and needs tending as much as you do." Martha said all this in a tone that brooked no argument, then stood up. "Leave it all to me."

"Um, no, Martha, really--"

Martha glared at Balsa. "It's no use complaining. You saved my Toun's life, I'll have you remember, and I intend to pay you back whether you want me to or not. So you're going to rest here for a while. I'll fetch the doctor and bring you some food." Martha got up and left the guest house before Balsa could say anything else.

Asra couldn't speak Yogoese, so she had no idea what was going on. She was standing near the wall of the main room with her eyes darting back and forth. Balsa came closer to her and said in Rotan, "A long time ago, my foster father Jiguro and I worked here as guards. Her son Toun got into a big, stupid fight over something that escalated into a fight to the death."

"Did you save him?"

Balsa shrugged. "Jiguro and I together managed to resolve that particular problem. Toun was seventeen or eighteen at the time. He was a violent hothead in those days, but now he's known throughout Shirogai as a fine upstanding merchant. Jiguro and I were being paid when we extricated Toun from that fight, but Martha insisted that we were his saviors and kept trying to pay us back. Even now, it seems." The corners of Balsa's mouth twitched upward. "To tell you the truth," Balsa said in a conspiratorial whisper, "part of me wishes we hadn't saved him, sometimes. I never wanted to cause Martha any trouble, but it may be too late now. I just hope Martha knows what she's getting herself into."

Asra suddenly understood why Martha had spent so much time staring at Balsa's face. Her features were calm and composed, but beneath this mask were clear signs of bone-deep exhaustion. Balsa hadn't said anything to complain, but she'd carried Asra through the mountains for days without rest, and she'd been wounded even before that. The men chasing them had given her fresh injuries. She must need rest desperately.

Balsa unwrapped her spear from the bundle of bamboo she'd been carrying and held it in her hand. She propped the spear up against the wall, closed her eyes and muttered, "Martha is very smart, and she

doesn't frighten easily..." Balsa lapsed into silence. Asra was afraid she might collapse. When Asra looked up at her and heard her soft breathing, she realized that Balsa had fallen asleep on her feet.

The last light of the sun streamed through the room's circular window. The room was quiet and covered in honey-colored light. The shadow of the windowpane's intricate fretwork pattern fell across Balsa's sleeping face. Asra took her time looking at Balsa; this was the first time they'd been able to stop for long enough for Asra to really look at her.

It was strange. She and Balsa had been complete strangers just days ago. *Why did she save me? She doesn't know me at all.*

Balsa's mouth was slightly open. Her lips here chapped and dry; her face was slightly pale from blood loss. Asra saw the bit of cloth Balsa had used to bandage her shoulder peeking out from under her clothes. She looked as worn out as an old rag.

Balsa smelled like dry grass warmed by the sun. Asra remembered her first night with Balsa, which she'd spent surrounded by Balsa's warmth and unfamiliar scent. Her heart was full of an unfamiliar emotion. Her throat felt parched and hot; she probably still had a fever. Asra pursed her lips and frowned. She wanted to thank Balsa, but she should probably wait until she woke up.

Asra took a deep breath. Her eyes fell on Balsa's pack sitting in the corner of the room. Asra stood up and tiptoed to the corner, careful not to make a sound. She undid the fastenings on the pack and saw Balsa's oiled paper folded up inside. Removing the paper from the pack would make a lot of noise.

Balsa continued to sleep standing upright. Her breathing was quiet and even.

Asra removed the oiled paper from the pack as quietly as she could. Balsa didn't wake. Asra made her way silently over to Balsa and wrapped her in the oiled paper all the way up to her shoulders so that she wouldn't get cold while she slept. This done, Asra crept as close to Balsa as she dared, resting her head near Balsa's feet before stretching

out completely on the floor. The floor was carpeted and surprisingly soft against her cheek. Asra was asleep the moment she closed her eyes.

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Asra dreamed of her mother. She was sitting with Asra in front of a fire. Her hand rested gently on Asra's head. It was warm, and her mother's hands and smell were soothing and familiar.

Ah, I remember this! She was like this a long time ago. Before...

Her mother had been so kind. Asra wanted to stay here with her longer, but the scene of her dream spiraled away from her and changed to something else. She was still with her mother, but now she was frowning and clearly troubled by something.

Asra shook her head and willed the dream to change back to the way it was before. And the dream did change--but she didn't get to go back to her kind mother sitting in front of a fire. Instead, the dream placed her in the middle of her very worst memory.

Light from pine torches above her flickered. Sparks flew off the torches into the surrounding dark. Rotans appeared and seized her mother's arms. Her mother screamed. Asra rushed forward, but someone tripped her from behind to keep her away from her mother. Whoever that was grabbed her and bound her arms as well, but she barely noticed them; all she cared about was going where her mother was going. She saw her mother's desperate face as they were dragged off and taken away together--

Talhamaya! Save us! Please!

Asra's body twisted in her sleep. She sprawled her limbs out completely on the floor. She felt a terrible piercing pain, but at the same time she was amazingly comfortable. The world of her dream went hushed and still under the harsh light of a full moon.

Chikisa grabbed her arm. His hands were sweating. In a voice that shook, he said, "A-Asra? What have you done?"

The wind blew toward her, carrying the strong smell of blood with it. Asra was completely overwhelmed and closed her eyes. She stopped up her ears with her fingers and tried to shut out Chikisa's voice.

"It wasn't me, Chikisa! You're wrong--it wasn't me! I didn't do it!" Asra cried out. Why couldn't Chikisa understand?

"You saw it all, didn't you?" her mother asked. "Isn't it wonderful? You've been chosen by the goddess Talhamaya! Everything will change now. We don't need to be afraid of anything ever again. The evil people of Rota will be like dust beneath our feet!"

"Chikisa, do you hear her, too?" Asra asked. "Mom said all those people were evil and cruel. If that's true, we should *want* to kill them," Asra said in a tone of desperation. "If they're like dust anyway, it shouldn't matter if they die. Talhamaya passes judgment on them. Can't you understand that? Am I wrong? If I'm wrong, why did Talhamaya choose me?"

She repeated her explanations over and over, but Chikisa only stared at her in clear incomprehension and horror. He stood under the pale light of the moon and shook his head vehemently at everything she said.

Asra writhed painfully and woke up. She didn't remember where she was at first. A man she'd never seen before led Martha into the room; seeing Martha made Asra remember that she was in Shirogai with Balsa. A fire had been lit in the room, and the world outside the window was pitch black. Asra was wrapped in a warm blanket.

Martha introduced the man to Balsa, who was also awake. The three of them left the room together; Asra followed at a little distance.

The man with Martha asked Balsa to take a seat on the floor and knelt down next to her. He exposed the wound in her left side and examined her arrow wounds. Clearly, he was some kind of doctor. He noticed Asra looking at them and said something; Balsa shifted around to face her.

The doctor pressed down on her wounded side, making Balsa grimace. Asra frowned; she didn't like to see Balsa in pain.

Balsa smiled at her. "There's no need for such a sour face," she said. "I'm all right."

"But doesn't it hurt?" Asra asked. Her voice was dry and quiet from her long sleep.

"I'm used to pain," Balsa said, still smiling. "Thank you for wrapping me up in the paper. I appreciate it."

Asra blushed and cast her eyes down. She heard the sound of the door sliding open behind her. Martha entered carrying a bucket covered in white cloth. She placed the bucket next to the doctor, then smiled kindly at Asra. She said something to her, but Asra couldn't understand it.

Balsa told Martha that Asra couldn't speak Yogoese.

"Ah! I'm sorry," Martha said to Asra in fluent Rotan. "I didn't know you were a Rotan child."

Asra wanted to say that she *wasn't* a Rotan child, but she stayed silent. She didn't want the woman in front of her to frown at her when she learned Asra was Tal. Her brother had told her that the people of New Yogo didn't know much about the Tal people and weren't hateful and prejudiced like Rotans, but she didn't know how much of that was true.

Despite her silence, Martha kept speaking to her in a lively and energetic tone. "We'll have dinner soon, but you should have a bath before we eat. We should leave Balsa alone with the doctor for a little while so he can treat her injuries. All right?"

Asra lifted her eyes to Martha's face and nodded. Martha extended her hand. Asra stared fearfully at it for a while, then slowly placed her own hand in Martha's.

Martha lifted Asra up one-armed with a strength that belied her small frame. She kept one hand in Asra's and carried her all the way to the bathroom of the guest house. The bathroom was built in the Yogo style, so Martha explained its features and amenities to Asra. When she finished, she asked, "Did you get all that? Should I leave you alone to bathe?"

Asra nodded. Martha gave her another kind smile. Her gaze became somewhat measuring and clinical, as if she was sizing up Asra for new clothing. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Twelve," Asra said.

"Hm, I thought so. My granddaughter is about the same age. She's taller than you, but she's always been skinny. I'll bring you something new to put on, so please put what you're wearing in the corner." Martha showed her where to put her dirty clothes, then left the bathroom.

Martha reminded Asra of a little bird fluttering to and fro. She was so small and moved so fast. Asra waited until she couldn't hear Martha's footsteps anymore, then undressed herself.

She climbed into the bath and settled herself on the bottom, a little afraid. The bottom of the tub was cold. There was a strange slippery stone sitting along the edge of the tub. There was a drain near her feet and a large opening in the side that let in hot water from somewhere outside the room.

The tub resembled an enormous jar. Asra picked up a bucket outside the tub as Martha had instructed, scooped up some of the hot water pouring into the tub, and poured the water over her shoulders. The sensation of hot water cascading over her back was entirely new and strange, but not unpleasant. This was the first time she'd ever had a Yogo-style bath. Tal people bathed in clear streams and rivers; they never used hot water.

In a porcelain container next to the tub, there was a fine powder like sand. Asra took some of the powder in her hand and rubbed it on her arm. The friction and water changed the sand into soft bubbles.

"Ah! It smells so nice!" The bubbles smelled like flowers. Asra was happily surprised at this new discovery, and washed herself thoroughly. She used up most of the powder that smelled like flowers, then rinsed herself with fresh hot water from the bucket.

Asra stepped out of the tub feeling flushed and warm, but a short time later she started shivering. The tips of her toes tingled with a sensation like pain. Her chest ached suddenly. She bore with the pain

and stayed standing still for a little while. The pain passed and she suddenly felt a whole lot better. All of her muscles relaxed. Her skin had felt tight and cold before her bath, but now it was supple and warm again. Asra bent down and hugged her knees. Steam still rose from the bath. She looked up at the tiles on the ceiling and noticed they were painted with patterns and designs.

Asra felt like something she'd been missing for a long time had suddenly returned to her. It was almost like all the terrible things that had happened to her lately hadn't really happened at all, but had been some kind of nightmare. *Why do I feel that way?* Asra wondered. Her entire life had changed overnight; she'd been sucked into the rapids of a river and had no idea where it was taking her.

I never knew Yogo people used hot water in their houses, she thought. When she thought about her ordinary life with her family before, she realized that if she'd stayed there she would never have found out what a hot bath was. *I wonder what Chikisa would think of all this...*

Asra's chest hurt again. She felt pressure and heat building inside her nose and suppressed a strong desire to cry. *I want to see Chikisa.*

The god would save Asra's life from bad people, but the god couldn't save Chikisa; not from here. He was too far away. Asra was tormented by thoughts of what was being done to him. But Chikisa had also been injured by the god. Ever since she'd seen his cut-open hand, Asra had been a little afraid of the god. She didn't want Talhamaya to kill other people just to keep her and Chikisa safe.

But she shouldn't think of Talhamaya that way. Talhamaya was pure and holy--thinking of her simply as a powerful force that killed people was blasphemous. Without the power of the god, Asra was nothing more than an ordinary twelve-year-old girl. She wouldn't be able to do anything to help herself or her brother at all.

Is there a way that I can live without harming or killing anyone else?

She remembered what Balsa had told her about Sufar, the magic weaver. He wanted to kill her to prevent some kind of disaster from happening. He was allied with the Rotans. Even if she promised never to

cause harm to anyone, she was certain Sufar wouldn't believe her. And she had her mother's wishes to consider. If Asra honored her mother's desires and did what she'd wanted to do with Talhamaya's power...well, the Rotans would undoubtedly consider that a disaster.

Asra shook her head. She was convinced that her mother hadn't truly understood the power of the god; she couldn't possibly expect Asra to do something so evil and cruel. She didn't want to believe her mother had wanted her to wage a bloody war against Rota.

I never wanted to kill anyone...

Tears escaped the corners of her eyes. How had all of this happened? She remembered gathering firewood and bringing it back to her family's small hut in the forest during a terrible winter. A blizzard buried the woods in snow, and Asra had become hopelessly lost. The wind had cut through her and frozen the tears in her eyes. She'd kept expecting to see her house, but everything around her had been whited out. She'd kept walking until the wind made it hard to breathe.

She remembered her utter helplessness in that situation because she felt almost the exact same way now. What could she do? She was lost.

When she'd been lost in the snow, her father had eventually found her and carried her home. The strength of his arms as he'd carried her reminded Asra of Balsa.

Balsa was a complete mystery to Asra. She'd saved Asra as if that was the obvious thing to do, even though she'd never even met her before. She reminded Asra of her father a lot, because she was strong and knew a lot about living in the woods. She was stoic like he was, too. Even when she'd been severely injured, she'd never screamed or cried.

Before they'd entered Shirogai, Balsa had stopped to clean her wounds in a shallow creek of cold water and change out of her bloodstained clothes. Asra had gotten her first long look at the extent of Balsa's injuries. She'd wanted to cry out herself at seeing them, but Balsa hadn't made a sound. Asra wondered why she hadn't. What was the point of suppressing or hiding her pain? She'd just told Asra that

she was used to pain, but Asra didn't really know what that meant. Pain was pain; it hurt. Being used to it shouldn't make it hurt any less.

As soon as she'd cleaned her wounds and changed, Balsa had gone into a bamboo grove and cut enough bamboo to create a bundle to hide her spear. Balsa never talked much, and Asra had found that particular silence uncomfortable. She hadn't had the courage to ask Balsa why she'd saved her. She still didn't have the courage to face her past.

Asra placed her palm over her throat. Thinking about Talhamaya scared her. She wanted to stay in the bathroom with the warmth and comfort of the hot water and sweet-smelling bubbles.

There was a knock on the door. Asra almost jumped out of her skin.

"May I come in?" Martha asked from the other side of the door.

"Yes," Asra said.

Martha entered the bathroom. She carried a large cloth and a stack of folded clothes. She unfolded the cloth with one hand and passed it to Asra. "Use this to dry yourself," she said. "Then we'll get you dressed, and I'll bring you back to Balsa. It's almost time for dinner."

Martha led Asra to a changing area behind a curtain in the bathroom. Asra accepted the clothes that Martha had brought and faced the curtain.

As she watched Martha turn to leave, Asra said, "Um..."

Martha faced her again.

"Thank you," Asra said. "Thank you so much."

Martha's eyebrows lifted in surprise. She smiled. "You're very welcome. It was my pleasure."

Asra went behind the changing curtain and dried herself. Then she unfolded the clothes Martha had given her to wear. The dress was red like a field of sarayu flowers blooming in spring. The collar of the dress was scoop-necked and came with a wide decorated sash. The dress was

easy to put on and light as a feather to wear, but it was also surprisingly warm. She tied the sash around her waist and watched the loose ends fall toward her feet. The dress was stunningly beautiful.

As soon as she was dressed, Asra realized that the dress and sash smelled like flower petals. *Can you weave cloth out of flowers?* she wondered.

Asra left the bathroom and went down the hall to the room where she'd last seen Balsa. She found both her and Martha sitting across from one another. The doctor must have left.

When Balsa's eyes fell on Asra, she gasped in surprise. "Well, would you look at that!"

Martha appeared extremely pleased with herself. "It's a perfect fit, just right for your height and coloring. If we we your hair up right and get some color back into your cheeks, you'll be the perfect image of a flower."

Asra blushed.

"But we should eat now," Martha said, changing the subject. "Eat as much as you like so you get healthy and strong again. Good health looks good on everyone, and I can already tell that you're going to be the kind of girl that turns a lot of heads."

Asra looked back and forth between Martha and Balsa and blushed even deeper. Martha's praise warmed her heart. "These clothes...smell really nice," she said softly. "Did you make them out of flowers?"

Martha's eyes filled with joy. "Make clothes out of flowers? I only wish I could. That fabric is made from the soft fibers of the shulam tree, which has a naturally sweet fragrance. Clothes made from the tree's fibers smell nice and prevent insects from eating them. I first thought of making fabric from the shulam tree more than thirty years ago, now. It's the most popular product at the Samada store. If you like those clothes, I'll give them to you as a gift. Please think of me kindly whenever you wear them."

Asra's face lit up. "Thank you so much! I promise I'll take good care of them."

Balsa had never seen Asra looking so happy and relaxed. She seemed like an entirely different person. *Martha's amazing, as always.*

Balsa sighed inwardly. To think that Asra would change so much with just a hot bath and a change of clothes. She would never have believed it if she weren't seeing it with her own eyes.

Martha had given Balsa a dress once. It has been the deep blue color of the autumn sky, with details embroidered in gold thread. "Someday, you'll have an occasion to wear this dress," Martha had told her. But Balsa had never even tried it on. For all she knew, it was still sitting in a chest somewhere in Tanda's house.

Dinner was brought in on a tray by an elderly woman that Balsa recognized. She was one of the women that had worked at the Samada store since Balsa had been a teenager. The woman nodded to Balsa in recognition, asked if she was well, then put down the dinner tray and withdrew quickly as if she didn't want to overstay her welcome.

"I don't want anyone that I don't trust knowing you're here," Martha said. "The messenger, doctor and the boy at the gate have all received detailed instructions from me. You should be perfectly safe here."

Balsa bowed her head. "Thank you."

Martha brushed aside Balsa's thanks with a nonchalant wave of her hand, then started explaining the different foods on the table to Asra.

"This is a pheasant that gets brined all night in spiced oils, then roasted over a charcoal pit. Try eating some with these diced-up onions."

Shirogai received fresh food from both Rota and Sangal. The town sold exotic spics and rare fruits and vegetables that weren't usually available in the rest of New Yogo. Because of their direct access to the supply chain, the food in Shirogai was often more varied and fresher than it was in Kosenkyo.

Asra tried a bit of the pheasant that Martha had recommended. The oil had saturated its skin, and when she bit into the meat she found it soft, yet crispy. It was also sweet and salty at the same time, from the spices. As the first bite slid down her throat, Asra's stomach reminded

her how hungry she was; she started stuffing her cheeks with the roast pheasant.

Balsa and Martha ate more slowly, speaking to one another in Rotan. For a little while, it was easy to forget that Balsa and Asra were still being pursued. The night passed peacefully.

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The Samada store didn't just sell clothes and accessories; it also sold a wide variety of woven and spun goods as well. There was also a workshop attached to the store.

Martha was the kind of person that couldn't keep her hands still; she was always doing or making something. The morning after Balsa and Asra's arrival, she had breakfast and stayed with them for a long while, switching between reading a pamphlet on making clothes, showing them new products from the store and workshop, and embroidering fabric. She talked the entire time.

Asra seemed fascinated by the pamphlet about clothes. Martha gave it to her to look at and asked, "Do you like this? Why?"

Asra's voice shook as she answered, "The collar and shoulders of this one look so comfy--I was thinking about what it would be like to wear it. I think it would look really nice with a sash, like with my dress."

Martha nodded. "You and I have similar tastes. I also like this style a lot." Martha's hands still held her embroidery needle and the fabric she was working on, but she wasn't embroidering. Her fingers tapped her embroidery hoop in a repeated pattern. Asra looked down at Martha's hands.

Balsa was consumed with nothing except her and Asra's speedy departure, but Martha wouldn't even hear of such a thing until Balsa's wounds were healed. "Use this time to recover and think about your next move," Martha said. "In business, it's not good policy to rush things along and hope that everything turns out well. I just heard from Toun that some merchant caravans will be leaving Shirogai soon. Several of

them are looking to hire guards for their journey. I'll have Toun look into it for you if you like. A caravan should provide some cover for your escape."

Balsa looked at Martha as she sat embroidering by the window and considered her idea. She was forced to admit that Martha had planned well, and that both she and Asra needed more rest. She really could use the extra time to figure out what she and Asra should do next. If they simply fled Rota and never went back, they wouldn't be able to free Tanda and Chikisa. She needed to understand why Sufar and the others with him were fixated on killing Asra.

Asra clearly possessed a violent and terrible power, but as far as Balsa could tell, she'd never harmed Sufar or anyone he knew. Asra was difficult to understand in some ways. She'd surrounded herself in a protective shell, as Balsa herself had once--but compared to Balsa, Asra was a much more kindhearted girl. She was considerate of others and didn't like seeing them hurt. She'd never once said that she wanted to use her power against Sufar to save her brother, even though she likely could.

Balsa was the kind of person that liked to swim against the current. She liked challenges for what they brought out in herself. Asra wasn't like that at all. She curled in on herself at the first sign of trouble and rode the raging stream of her life wherever it might take her. Sufar believed her capable of causing some kind of terrible large-scale disaster, but Balsa didn't believe that was possible. As long as she had her brother with her, she'd probably be able to live peacefully in New Yogo for the rest of her life.

"Asra."

Hearing her name, Asra looked up at Balsa with a nervous expression.

"What would you say to living in New Yogo? It's probably different from what you're used to, but..."

Asra's nervous tension vanished in an instant. She grinned and said, "I really like it here--Martha, the clothes, the bath, the food, everything!

Sitting on the floor and not using chairs is a little strange, but it's so warm here that I don't mind."

Asra spoke somewhat haltingly, but it did seem like her mind was made up. "I never even thought people could live like this in Rota. If Chikisa was here, this would be the best place in the world."

"So you're saying that if you had Chikisa with you, staying in New Yogo would be good? Remember, you won't ever be able to go back to Rota again."

Asra nodded. She thought for a moment, then whispered, "When we were at the inn, Chikisa said that Mr. Tanda was a good person. He doesn't hate the Tal people, and he was kind to us. Chikisa wanted to become Tanda's apprentice, maybe. I know we might seem like a burden to him, but we'd work really hard, and when we grow up I know we'll find some way to pay him back. That's what Chikisa and I talked about. We wanted to ask Mr. Tanda what he thought, but we never got the chance."

Balsa's heart was touched by this unexpected revelation, so much so that she wasn't able to say anything right away.

"We...we don't have any family, and if we stay in Rota they'll kill us. We don't have any money, either, and we're still kids, so I don't know how we could live in New Yogo now..." Asra's voice shook. "I want to live in New Yogo, but how?"

Balsa reached out and lifted Asra's chin. She was crying. Asra buried her face in Balsa's lap and sobbed.

"Tanda's a very kind person, but he's not exactly rich," Balsa said. "Living with him would be a lot different from living with Martha and Toun. You're not related, so he'd have to make you apprentices. But I can promise the food he'd make for you would be the best you've ever tasted."

Balsa tried to lighten the mood, but Asra just clung to her knees and kept crying. She looked up at Martha, who appeared deeply worried. Her eyes seemed to ask, *What are you planning? Will you raise this girl?*

Asra was a stranger. Balsa owed her nothing. But the time had come for Balsa to make a choice. She hadn't abandoned Asra and Chikisa at the inn, and she didn't intend to abandon them now. She wanted Asra to be able to live a normal life, and she wasn't going to give up until that happened. Remembering how Asra had so carefully wrapped her in the oiled paper was heartbreaking. Asra deserved better.

Balsa gave Martha a bitter smile. "Maybe it's fate. It's probably best for us to keep moving until I figure out a way to save Tanda and her brother. I'm used to that kind of life."

She wondered if Asra would keep opening up to her as they traveled. Balsa needed to know exactly what had happened at Shintadan. She wouldn't be able to plan effectively unless she understood the thing hidden inside Asra. But she wouldn't be able to gain that understanding just by asking, and if she tried to force the information out of Asra she'd lose any possibility of building trust between them. If Sufar was right, Asra was going to kill a lot of people. Balsa had the feeling that if she pushed Asra too hard, she risked bringing the terrible power within her to full alertness. If that happened, there'd be no going back.

Balsa hadn't known Asra for very long, but she knew that she wasn't the kind of person that enjoyed killing people. But Asra had already killed many people, and Balsa didn't know how to help her recover from such an act. Her crime would probably weigh heavily on her for the rest of her life.

Balsa realized suddenly that she might be able to make a deal with Sufar--one that he might accept. Thinking about Tanda made her heart ache. She wanted to free him as soon as possible and see him smile at her again.

But Tanda wouldn't want her to rush things for his sake. She could almost hear him say, "Keep doing things your own way, like you always do. Don't let me be a distraction."

She'd find out more about the caravans Martha had mentioned and find some way to get a letter to Torogai, Tanda's master. She might be able to come up with some new ideas on how to save him. Balsa knew

that Torogai would do everything she could to help Tanda if she knew he was in trouble.

But getting a letter to Torogai would take a long time--at least ten days. And Torogai was prone to wandering, so she might not be at home to receive a letter. Balsa wouldn't be able to rely on Torogai's help for quite some time. If she was going to save Tanda, she'd have to do it herself.

Asra stopped crying and stood up, keeping her face to the ground in shame. She turned away from Balsa and went to wash her face. Balsa heard her footsteps fading down the hall.

"Balsa, it's Toun," Toun said from the entrance of the guest house. "I'm coming in." Toun came into the main room and stopped in front of Balsa. He was about thirty years old and ha deep, rumbling voice. He wasn't very tall, but his shoulders were broad. The gleam of intelligence in his eyes matched his mother's. All in all, he carried himself with an unassuming air of personal dignity.

Balsa rose to greet Toun. "It's been a long time," Balsa said. Toun was a successful merchant in his own right now, and bore little resemblance to the boy she'd known. "It's weird. You're so...respectable, now."

Toun laughed and slapped his gut. "Respectable and fat! I was a much worse person when I was skinny as a bamboo pole. But you--you haven't changed at all, Balsa. Has it really been five years since your last visit?"

"I think that's about right."

Toun gestured politely for Balsa to resume her seat. Toun pulled up a cushion and sat across from her as she sat back down. He glanced over at Martha, who was still embroidering at the window. "Mom, the weaving master wants to see you."

Martha waved one hand dismissively and shrugged. "The weaving master always wants to see me. I'll go see him in a minute."

Toun chuckled, then nodded. He returned his attention to Balsa. "I wish we had more time to talk, but it seems the circumstances won't permit that. I just came back from talking with Tachiya. There are three

caravans preparing to depart from Shirogai within the next five days. All of them are looking to hire guards. One's headed for Kosenkyo, one's headed for Sangal, and one's headed for Rota's capital. Tachiya is a bit tough to work for since he's spoiled for choice--you'll undoubtedly have competition. These caravans are hiring only one guard each because they're smaller and can't afford the city's professional guard services. Do you want me to keep asking around, or...?"

"No," Balsa said. "I'll work for Tachiya, if he'll take me. I know he's a bit gruff, but he also doesn't talk much and knows how to be discreet. And I'm glad the caravans are small. Not every guard-for-hire likes working with women."

Toun nodded. "So that's settled. I'll secure your employment for you, so no one will know that it's you who's looking for work. The caravans are leaving in five days."

Chapter 3 - Betrayal

Balsa wanted to go to Tachiya's alone. Walking with Asra would make her stick out like a sore thumb. But guards for a caravan needed to apply for the job in person, and if she intended to bring a child with her, it was only fair for her potential employer to know that up front.

Caravans often traveled over vast distances, so those who traveled in them needed to get along well. Even if Balsa made a good impression, Asra might be dismissed as too weak or too much of a burden. Finding work might be a bit more difficult than Balsa had anticipated.

Martha had done her best to make sure Asra would make a good impression. She'd done Asra's hair up nicely and covered her head in a traditional Yogoese face covering that girls often used to block out the sun when they went out walking.

People along the side of the street called out to Balsa, offering her a ride to her destination via donkey cart for a small fee, but Balsa didn't dare take them up on such an offer. Riding in a cart would attract too much attention. Shirogai drew in people from all over; Balsa just wanted to blend in with the crowd.

Balsa remained observant of her surroundings and kept Asra's hand in hers. The light of the sun was weak and pale, signaling the arrival of winter. Tachiya's store was located inside a rat maze of narrow interconnected streets that was quite difficult to find. The sign outside the store proclaimed in bold letters, "We Have Everything!"

Tachiya had connections with a lot of wealthy merchants in the area and kept a watchful eye on the markets he trafficked in. The door and windows of the store were covered in thin cloth so that aimless passersby couldn't look straight in. Balsa had selected Tachiya because of his naturally cautious nature. He hadn't advertised his need for guards widely; Toun had told her that the other merchants in Shirogai didn't know he was hiring anyone.

When they arrived in front of the store, Balsa switched her spear from her right hand to her left. Seeing this, Asra wondered if Balsa's left side didn't hurt anymore.

Balsa lifted the cloth covering the door and entered, leading Asra. The inside of the store was larger than she'd expected. It was almost entirely empty. Hard-packed gravel crunched beneath her feet as she walked. There was a formal space for guests straight ahead. A little old man sat stooped behind a desk with four men seated directly in front of him on a bit of planking that extended from the wall like a bench. The four men and the man behind the desk were talking about something when Balsa and Asra walked in.

When the men noticed Balsa, they all looked up. Three of the men on the bench appeared to be merchants, but the fourth was unmistakably a warrior. His hand rested close to his sheathed longsword. His sleeves were rolled back, revealing strong arm muscles. He was bearded and exuded an air of calm confidence.

The three merchants all appeared to be quite young. Their eyes passed over Balsa, but they all sat up straight when they saw Asra. They were clearly trying to compare her and Balsa's faces. These men probably traveled in Rota a lot, so they must know that Asra was Tal. Balsa pulled Asra behind her to protect her from the men's probing glances.

The old man standing behind the desk smiled and stood up. "It's been a long time, Balsa. I hope you've been well."

"It's good to see you, Tachiya," Balsa said. "I'm fortunate to be quite well. You're looking well, yourself."

Tachiya's smile deepened. "Toun came to me with a message. He said you want to join the caravan going to Sangal as a guard. Is that right?"

Hearing this, the warrior sitting with the merchants glared rudely at Balsa. Balsa pointedly ignored him. "Yes. I'd like to bring this girl with me. I know that may be inconvenient, so I'm willing to charge half my usual rate."

"Excuse me, may I ask you something?" one of the merchants asked. He was looking at Asra again.

"Go ahead," Balsa said.

"How much do you usually charge? I've only just taken over my father's store, so I don't know the going rate for bodyguards."

"My usual fee is thirty copper coins per day, plus meals."

The warrior laughed. "Don't you think that's unreasonable? That's the rate for a first-class guard."

Balsa said nothing, but Tachiya shifted his gaze from her to the warrior. "Janon, Balsa *is* a first-class guard. Her strength and experience speak for themselves. She's worth every copper coin she costs."

Janon's expression twisted in clear distaste, but he knew he wouldn't get the job if he displeased Tachiya, so he kept his mouth shut.

The merchant that had asked the question about Balsa's rate grunted. "Half-price is still fifteen copper coins a day, and the caravan will have to feed two people instead of one," he said to Janon.

"If you hire me," Janon said, "I'll only charge twenty copper coins a day and meals. I won't have an extra person with me, either, so I'll be cheaper to feed, too. Whoever heard of a guard bringing a child on a job? She'd be too distracted to keep the caravan safe."

Tachiya shook his head. "Mr. Naka, I thought you were headed to Rota, not Sangal. Balsa is being considered for the caravan heading to Sangal."

The merchants put their heads together and discussed what Balsa and Janon had said. Tachiya held out his hand and beckoned Balsa to come closer. Balsa approached Tachiya and leaned close to him.

Tachiya whispered, "Someone came here asking for you last night."

"For me?" Balsa whispered back. "Who was it?"

"A man from New Yogo, I think. He said his name was Tanda."

Balsa felt a shock like a blow to the chest. Her eyes widened. "What did he look like?"

"Shorter, a little fat, around forty years old."

It wasn't Tanda.

"He came to deliver a letter," Tachiya said. "He asked me to give it to you if you came here. Here it is."

Balsa snatched the letter from his hand and snapped the string holding it in a scroll shape. The letter was in Rotan. Her eyes devoured the words in front of her at top speed. When she finished reading the letter, a chill went down her spine.

On the morning of the twentieth day of Shasam, a bell will ring inside Rota's Ritual Hall at Jitan. If you're not at the gate of the Ritual Hall by the time the bell stops ringing, we will kill Tanda and Chikisa.

The letter wasn't signed, but it was obviously from Sufar and his followers. They knew she was here--not just in Shirogai, but here in this exact spot in Tachiya's store. Tachiya had just told her that the man that had delivered the letter had done so last night. Balsa mentally counted the days since she and Asra had managed to evade their pursuers. They shouldn't have been able to discover their whereabouts and plans this fast. Tachiya's shop wasn't easy to find, not even for Balsa.

Had Tanda told them where she was? Balsa didn't think that Tanda would betray her, but she couldn't think of a better explanation. Tanda was a good person, and a trustworthy one--had something happened to him? Torture? Had Sufar coerced him into some kind of deal? Balsa didn't think that Tanda would agree to anything without thinking it through first, but she couldn't shake her growing sense of unease.

Sufar had used a man to deliver this letter to her. That man had used Tanda's name. To her, that indicated clear ill intent on Sufar's part. Balsa's awareness of the room retreated as fear overwhelmed her.

"Balsa?" Asra asked. She sounded worried.

Balsa snapped back into focus and took a few breaths to bury her emotions so that they wouldn't show. "I'll tell you later," she whispered to Asra.

Balsa started thinking about how long it would take them to reach Jitan. Jitan was at the very heart of Rota, equidistant from its northern and southern borders. Shasam was the first month of the new year. If

she and Asra left today, they'd have forty days to make the journey, which should be plenty of time.

But why Jitan in the first place? Balsa knew that there was some kind of ceremony celebrating the founding of Rota on the twenty-second day of Shasam in the the Ritual Hall. Balsa and Asra were required to be in Jitan two days before the ceremony. Was that significant?

She needed time to think, but she and Asra would definitely need to head to Rota soon. She knew that much. It bothered her that not only had Sufar known she'd be in Shirogai: he also knew she'd seek employment with a caravan. It was all too much of a coincidence. Tanda must have told him.

It was clear that Sufar knew where she was, so why had he bothered with sending a letter at all? She expected that Sufar and the others were keeping watch on them from afar. If that was the case, why hadn't they attacked again? Were they that afraid after what had happened during their first encounter? That seemed unlikely. This whole setup didn't have the correct underpinnings for an ambush, but Sufar definitely seemed to be luring her into a trap.

Something about this entire situation had changed without her knowledge. By sending this letter and presenting such stark terms, Sufar and his allies were putting Balsa at a disadvantage. She had no means of renegotiation; no means of contacting Sufar to change the terms. She had no choice but to go to Jitan before the appointed day.

Sufar and the others probably wouldn't attack Balsa and Asra on their journey; they would have no reason to. They could reasonably expect Balsa and Asra to show up in Jitan. Any trap they set for them would be there.

"Tachiya. I'm sorry, but my circumstances have suddenly changed," Balsa said. "Is there a caravan heading to Rota soon?"

The warrior, Janon, stood up. "I have been assigned to guard the caravan to Rota."

Balsa faced him fully for the first time. "No, you haven't. Tachiya still needs to ask the caravan for final personnel assignments before it departs. That's how these jobs always go. Tachiya's agreed to ask the caravan to employ you, but I suspect he hasn't done that yet."

Tachiya rested his chin in his hand. "Well, isn't this a problem. Balsa, the toll to pass through the mountains using the main road at Nabal Pass has recently increased, so many caravans are skirting the roads and crossing into Rota at the Samal Pass. It's dangerous at this time of year, though. In ten days' time, I expect that the Samal Pass will be entirely buried in snow. This is probably the last caravan Mr. Naka will be able to send to Rota this year."

Balsa nodded. "Thanks for explaining the circumstances. I hate to ask after all you've already done for me, but would you act as a go-between for me to be employed in the caravan going to Rota? You and I both respect one another as reliable professionals, so I know your recommendation would carry a lot of weight."

Mr. Naka stood up. "Hey, wait a minute now. Even if you are a first-class guard recommended by Tachiya, feeding the child will probably cost fifteen copper coins a day. My caravan doesn't have a lot of people, and no leeway to take care of an additional child. If you can overcome these objections through a demonstration of skill, I may consider taking Tachiya's recommendation."

Janon's expression displayed his rage openly, but he controlled himself quickly so he wouldn't make a bad impression. Badmouthing another guard in front of a potential employer was a sure-fire way to ruin his reputation.

Janon's voice was calm and composed as he said, "Mr. Naka, you're the leader of the caravan, so the decision is yours. Please permit me to make my case before you make your choice. This woman may be a first-rate bodyguard, but bandits and thieves will underestimate her simply because she's a woman. She seems to be a spear wielder, and she must be a master practitioner based on her reputation, but what would happen if she didn't have her weapon close to hand during an attack?

Could she defend herself, the child and the caravan in such a case? Without her spear, she's an unarmed woman. I'm certain she'd be no match for me in unarmed combat."

Tachiya remained silent, but his eyes sparkled as if he'd just heard an extremely funny joke. Balsa glanced over at Tachiya, who grinned back at her in complete silence. She realized she would have to defend her own reputation here.

Balsa returned her gaze to Janon. "You shouldn't put other people down to make yourself look better."

"I'm not putting you down at all," Janon said.
"I'm sure you're very good. I just told the truth as I see it. If I'm wrong, please prove it to me."

Balsa sighed inwardly, then whispered to Asra: "Hold my spear for me, please, and go stand in the corner over there. The spear's heavy, so be careful and don't drop it."

Asra looked nervous, but she did as Balsa said. The spear was much heavier than it appeared to be. She had to hold it in both hands as she retreated to the corner. Her blood pounded so loud in her veins that it hurt. Her mouth went dry.

Janon drew himself up to his full height. He was taller than Balsa by a head. By appearances if nothing else, Janon had a clear advantage in unarmed combat. Balsa was also going into this fight injured. Asra was so nervous that she almost dropped Balsa's spear.

Janon gave Balsa a challenging look that seemed to say, *Come at me!*

Balsa bent her knees slightly and lifted her arms to protect her head. Her right leg twitched. Janon appeared to be right-handed. He stood in ready stance with one leg behind him and his front leg slightly bent, which protected roughly half of his body from direct attacks. He was making it as difficult as possible for Balsa to target any weak or vital points.

Janon wound up his left fist and aimed a punch directly at Balsa's face.

Balsa brushed his fist away with her right hand. He noticed her movement the exact instant that she yanked his shoulder down so hard that he had to lean completely forward in order to keep his balance. Smooth as oil, Balsa brought her right elbow sharply into Janon's ribs.

Janon's eyes widened in pain and anger. He'd done his best to protect himself from that kind of attack, but Balsa had managed to break past his defensive stance. Janon grunted and twisted away from her, shooting his hand out to grab her hair as she moved. He could use her hair to pull her in and knee her in the head--then she'd be done for. She was a woman; all he needed was one hard hit to bring her down.

There was a sound like a tree branch snapping suddenly; the next moment, the hand that was reaching for Balsa's hair convulsed in pain. Janon didn't see what she'd done; she was too fast. When she'd noticed his fist open to grab her hair, Balsa had used the blade of her hand to strike hard against his knuckles. At least one of his fingers was broken.

Janon's body curled protectively around his broken hand. Balsa kept attacking; she didn't intend to let him off so easily. She released a loud kihap to strengthen her next strike, which landed just below his ear. Janon fell to his knees and did not move.

Even then, Balsa didn't stop. She got in close, carefully so that Janon couldn't grab her legs and trip her, then lifted his closed eyelids with her fingers and pushed in. He went limp under her, clearly unconscious.

Her air of murderous intent vanished in an instant as she backed away from him.

The merchants were stunned speechless. Balsa walked over to Asra and reclaimed her spear. The merchants recovered the ability to move and speak as if they were breaking free from some spell.

Naka whispered something to the others. His face was deathly pale as he regarded Balsa with an expression of disgust. "I can see that you're strong, but you strike me as far too cruel a person for this kind of work. You knew that you could defeat Janon--that much is obvious--but did you have to break his hand to prove that? He won't be able to work for a while."

Tachiya spoke up suddenly: "Mr. Naka, Balsa only injured him so much because I didn't inform her of Janon's previous experience. He's worked as a guard in bars and restaurants in Shirogai, but he has no experience guarding caravans. I understand that your caravan is small and that you'll only be hiring one guard, but that makes you an easy target for thieves. You will need to move more carefully and discreetly than larger caravans. If you do run into bandits or thieves, I wouldn't expect them to spare your lives."

Naka nodded in understanding.

"Guarding a bar and guarding a caravan are completely different. That's why Janon's rate is ten copper coins fewer than Balsa's per day. I verified this to Janon, but he still dismissed Balsa as just a woman. I'm sure Janon is a good swordsman, but he still lacks skill in unarmed combat. Balsa saw through all of his attacks easily. I don't think he's ready to guard a caravan yet. I led Balsa to believe that this was a job

opening for a caravan, which is why she fought as she did. It's better for him to break his fingers now than it would be to have a bandit break his neck later.

"Balsa shows no mercy to her opponents. She chooses to fight them on equal terms, and even when they fall she does not pause, but continues to attack and defend. Even weaponless, she's a formidable fighter. Until Janon's fingers heal, I have no other guards available for hire. It may be advisable to part ways now and meet again under better circumstances.

"Mr. Naka, Balsa is not cruel or heartless, but she will be relentless in defending your lives and your goods. That's why she's a first-rate bodyguard."

Naka's expression stiffened in discomfort. Blood gradually returned to his pale face. "I see. You've taught me a valuable lesson," he said to Balsa. "If I asked you to guard my caravan, would you accept?"

Balsa nodded. "Gladly. I just have one question. Where in Rota are you headed?"

"I mostly trade in leather and furs. I always travel around northern Rota at this time of year to replenish my stock. The route is always the same: we travel all around the north, then return to New Yogo."

"I see. Will we pass by Toluan?"

Naka nodded. "It seems you know Rota well. There's a large market that trades in leather in Toluan."

"I have a place I need to go in Rota, and soon," Balsa said. "I can guard you until we reach Toluan. I have connections there and can introduce you to another first-rate guard that can protect you for the rest of your journey. Do we have an agreement?"

Naka nodded. His eyes shifted to Asra, who was standing behind Balsa. "Your terms are reasonable, but I'm curious about the girl. She can't possibly be your daughter; you appear to be from Kanbal, but she's..."

"She's not my daughter," Balsa said smoothly. She smiled a little and tried to inject some friendliness into her tone. "I saved this girl from

being sold by slave merchants. She has no family, so I brought her along with me."

"Ah, I see. So that's why she's with you."

Naka considered for a moment, then extended his hand. Balsa shook it, formalizing their agreement. Balsa passed Tachiya's fee discreetly to him and whispered, "If someone else comes looking for me, tell them that you delivered the letter and that I understand their terms. I will be in Jitan on the appointed day." She paused, then added, "But if they don't keep their word and harm Tanda or Chikisa, I'll make them wish they were never born."

Balsa spoke dispassionately, but Tachiya sensed murderous intent emanating from her in waves for a second. Tachiya nodded and scrawled something rapidly on a piece of scrap paper. He lifted his head to look at Balsa, eyes shining with admiration.

"I saw Jiguro fight, a lot, a long time ago. I never thought anyone could equal him as a fighter. He aged, but never weakened or slowed down. What I saw today made me think you just might be a match for him."

Balsa smiled. "I may be a woman, but Jiguro taught me how to be strong. There are many paths to strength--not all of them rely on muscle power. I wouldn't have been able to stay in this line of work for very long without him teaching me that."

Tachiya chuckled. "I'll probably retire before you even think about slowing down. I should introduce you to my son someday."

Balsa finished talking through the details of her arrangement with Naka. They promised to meet at a certain spot on the road the next day. After this was decided, Balsa and Asra left Tachiya's store. Balsa checked their surroundings for any signs that they were being followed, but she saw nothing except ordinary people passing by on the street. She felt no watchful eyes upon them.

Strong, clear sunlight warmed Balsa's shoulders as she took Asra's hand and started walking back to Martha's store.

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Shortly after Balsa left Tachiya's store, Tanda and Sufar entered it, lifting the cloth over the door as they came in. Shihana and Mark stayed outside the store and kept watch. Chikisa was still tied up at the inn they were staying at in Shirogai.

"Do you have some business at my store, gentlemen?" Tachiya asked as Sufar and Tanda entered.

Tanda came closer to Tachiya and said, "Excuse me, but are you Tachiya? Do you assign guards to caravans traveling out of the city?"

"Yes, I am Tachiya, and that is a service that I provide. Are you looking to hire a guard?"

"Um, no... I'm, uh, actually looking for a friend. I heard about you from this friend, and I was wondering if you've been in contact with her lately. Do you know a bodyguard named Balsa?"

Tachiya's expression remained fixed in place. "Excuse me, sir, but may I ask for your name?"

"Of course! Forgive me for being so rude, I'm just so..." He paused and cleared his throat. "My name is Tanda."

Tachiya's eyes narrowed. "Hm. I'm not sure if I should answer your questions. A man named Tanda was here not two days ago, but he was quite a bit shorter and fatter than you. I passed his letter to Balsa, as he asked me to."

Tanda spun around and faced Sufar. Sufar appeared just as confused as he was.

Had Sufar betrayed Tanda? Tanda glared at him in accusation, but Sufar shook his head vehemently. "I swear, I don't know anything about this at all."

Tachiya observed their exchange, then said, "Balsa asked me to tell you something. Would you like to hear it?"

Tanda nodded.

Tachiya fumbled around with the papers on his desk until he found a piece of scrap paper with something written on it. He appeared to be farsighted; he had to hold the paper well away from his face in order to read it. "I understand your terms. I'll be in Jitan on the agreed-upon day. If you hurt Tanda or Chikisa, I'll make you wish you'd never been born."

Tanda went pale as he stared at the words on the paper. Sufar stood next to him; he frowned as he took in the message. What was going on here? If Sufar hadn't betrayed Tanda, then how had this happened?

In a voice that shook, Tanda asked Tachiya if Balsa had been hired by a caravan. Tachiya clammed up completely and would say no more.

It was getting dark when Tanda and Sufar left the store. The change in lighting conditions from the inside of the shop to the outside was slightly disorienting. Shihana walked up to them with a small monkey sitting on her shoulder.

The monkey had a scrap of piece of red cloth tied around its neck. Tanda remembered seeing that monkey before. Did the monkey he'd seen at the inn at the Herb Market belong to Shihana?

Sufar rushed toward Shihana, but he hadn't taken two steps before a man seized his arms from behind. Tanda felt his own arms being yanked back. Sufar turned to face the men restraining them. His eyes widened in recognition. "Rawal Kafam?"

The men gripped Tanda and Sufar securely before they could struggle. Shihana walked up to them slowly. "Sorry, dad," she said. "Your way takes too long, so I asked some of my friends to help us out."

Sufar glared daggers at Shihana. "What have you done?"

"This whole time, I've been trying to guide Rota toward the best possible future with my moves. I knew you'd oppose me if you knew what I was doing, so I kept it secret. I knew it would come to this eventually." She paused. "Let's go back to the inn. We need to head back to Rota as soon as possible. I expect you to follow my lead from here on out."

Sufar spluttered in consternation, but Shihana's dispassionate expression did not shift. Her eyes assumed their usual quality of

looking through what was in front of her. They were focused on something far, far away.

Epilogue - Setting off on a Journey

Asra awoke just as the sun's rays peeked over the horizon at dawn. Balsa was already awake. She sat near the window, tending to the wound in her left shoulder. She noticed Asra stirring and said, "Good morning."

"Does that hurt?" Asra asked.

Balsa shook her head. "No. It's mostly better."

Asra looked away from her. She swallowed like she was mustering her courage, then looked at Balsa's wound. She thought that the arrow had gone in quite deep, but now most of the wound was covered in shiny new skin.

"Whenever I see myself getting better so fast, I wonder why. I think it happens because I have a strong desire to live."

Asra's eyes met Balsa's. With a hint of embarrassment, Balsa said, "Does seeing this bother you?"

Asra nodded.

After tending to her injuries, Balsa told Asra about the letter she'd gotten at Tachiya's store. They had to go to Rota's Ritual Hall in Jitan in order to save her brother. When Balsa mentioned the Ritual Hall, Asra stiffened in shock. Balsa didn't know this, but Jitan was considered a sacred site a long time ago, back when Rota was still called Rotarbal. A clear cold spring flowed out of the Ritual Hall; in the center of the spring was an enormous tree. A wreath of interconnected mistletoe flowers hung from the top branches of the tree. The Ritual Hall was the place where the young Shiul woman had become Sada Talhamaya. It was also the place where Kiran had killed her.

Asra felt like the hand of fate was guiding her to that sacred place. At the same time, she felt an incredible sense of inevitability and hopelessness, as if she was being sucked into a raging storm. *Sufar probably wants to kill me in the same place Sada Talhamaya was killed*,

Asra thought. She was scared, but she couldn't tell Balsa that. If she did, she'd have to explain the significance of Jitan. She'd have to tell her that Asra would be able to invite Talhamaya to unite with her in that place.

Asra understood that they were being lured into a trap with Chikisa and Tanda as bait. Still, they had no choice but to go. Her fear overwhelmed her for a moment. Her mother had taught her to always be calm and composed to demonstrate her worthiness in being chosen by the god, but her mother's words failed to suppress her fear now. She stood in the corner of the room and shook.

Balsa walked over to Asra and rested her hand on her shoulder. "I'll tell you something my foster father told me. No matter how impossible a situation seems, don't give up until the second your soul leaves your body. As long as you're still alive, there's still hope. There are times in life where you'll do your very best and work as hard as you can with no reward, but the second you give up, it's all over. Nothing will get better, and you won't be able to save anyone."

Balsa's voice helped Asra calm down enough to stop shaking.

"I know your brother is precious and irreplaceable to you," Balsa said. "I feel the same way about Tanda. We'll find them soon. I promise."

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Balsa changed her bandages and got dressed. "We're going back to Rota with a caravan," she said.

Asra nodded in understanding. She felt worried without really knowing why.

Balsa noticed her expression and said, "I know you and I will be traveling again, but this won't be like the last time. More people will be with us, and no one will chase us. We'll have to go on horseback, which will be hard at first, but most people in the caravan aren't used to riding horses, either, so I think the pace will be easy to handle. We'll eat with them and work with them--we should be able to blend right in.

"But listen, Asra, this is important. If thieves or bandits attack us, I have to think about the safety of everyone in the caravan. I can't just protect you and leave the others to fend for themselves. I need to work hard to save everyone's lives. Do you understand?"

Asra nodded deeply.

"All right. Then let's get ready."

Asra helped Balsa pack and tidy up Martha's guest house before their departure. Asra's sense of worry and unease only increased as she cleaned. Balsa would be there to protect her on this journey, but it was possible that she'd be distracted because she had to protect everyone else, too. If Asra did get into trouble, she could always count on the god to save her, but...

I must be noble and clear-minded and strong, she thought. *I was chosen by Talhamaya.* She took a deep breath and stood up straight. The bright light of the morning sun streamed through the window, making the freshly cleaned and polished surfaces of the room shine.

Asra heard footsteps. Martha came inside and took in the state of the room. "So you're leaving," she muttered. Her eyes fell on a small package poking out from underneath the folded-up bedding. She crossed the room and picked it up. Balsa had wrapped up part of Naka's advance payment to give to Martha as a way of expressing her gratitude.

Martha pressed the package into Balsa's hands. Balsa opened her mouth to day something, but Martha shook her head firmly. "If I accepted this, I wouldn't be your friend," she said.

Martha looked at Asra. "Asra, I don't know what awaits you on your journey, but I want you to know that you're welcome to come back whenever you like. You have a good eye for clothes; I think you could be an excellent dressmaker one day. I'd even teach you so that you could work in my store. I'm sure I'd be able to find a good job for your brother, too."

Asra's eyes widened in surprise. She straightened up and looked Martha in the eyes.

"It's hard work to be a shopkeeper or a merchant," Martha said, "but if it's something you want to do, I swear I'll help you however I can. Please don't forget me."

Martha's sincere eyes and kind smile made something around Asra's neck heat up suddenly. Asra bit her trembling lip so that she wouldn't cry, then took a seat on the floor. She lifted her hand and placed a finger each on her forehead, nose, and mouth. Then she dropped her hand and brought her forehead to the floor. This was a gesture of heartfelt thanks performed by the Tal people.

Balsa looked up at Martha, then bowed her head deeply. It was her way of thanking Martha for offering Asra a future.

The white light of the sun struck the side of Balsa's face. She gripped her spear comfortably in one hand. Balsa met Asra's eyes as she stood up from the floor. Balsa took Asra's hand in hers. Together, they set out on a new journey.

Afterword

This is the first novel I've ever had to split in half.

I love reading long stories, and I love writing them, too. Up until now I've written nothing but long novels, but this was the first one ever that got split into two parts due to sheer length. It's been an unusual experience for me. As I imagined Balsa and Asra fleeing from the Kashal, the ancient history and legends of the Rota kingdom spread over and around them like the branches of a tree. The branches of this tree that I cultivated spread so much that the book could no longer fit into a single volume.

In many ways, this book mirrors my experience with the entire Guardian of the Spirit series. I never imagined that when I began writing it that I would spend so many pleasant years nurturing the growth of this story tree I created. To all the fans of all ages from around the world, I hope this book comes as a welcome addition to the series.

Balsa and her friends still have a hard road ahead, but it would make me happy if you'd continue to walk it with them.

Uehashi Nahoko

Story Notes on Guardian of the God

Author's notes on the story's origin

I can remember the original inspiration for a lot of my stories, though not all of them. *Guardian of the God's* genesis is something I remember quite clearly. Can you guess how I first thought of it? I was at a little cafe in the mountains at the time. If I recall correctly, I was talking with an editor from the Kaseisha company. I got up to go to the bathroom, and when I came back the idea just hit me out of nowhere.

There was a literary competition going on at a hotel nearby; they were taking submissions that would be considered for an award. I'd been thinking of submitting something or other, but even though I remember talking to the editor I don't remember what I was going to submit at all.

Anyway, the authors submitting their work were all highly respected and brilliant; many of them read their works aloud at the hotel. It was a remarkable experience seeing so many talented people bringing their works to life. I've said that *Guardian of the God* had its genesis in that place, but I didn't read any of it aloud there--I thought its tone was too different from the rest of what I was hearing.

I wanted to tell a story with swords and battles, which was a bit of a strange impulse for me. Balsa fights to protect people, so I needed to showcase that--but I also felt like this story would be an epic chase. I could clearly see Balsa running from something. And with that, I started writing. The ideas didn't come too easily after that--it was hard to figure a lot of things out. Sometimes I felt like my ideas bounced back at me in rejection.

So there you have it: where this book came from, and why it's in two parts. The working title was *Guardian of the Approaching God*, but that seemed a little long compared to the other titles in the series.

As soon as I delivered the manuscript for both parts of the book to my editor, I had to leave for field work in Australia for several weeks. The day I was set to go home, there was a series of awful terrorist attacks that left me stranded. I was struck by the synchronicity of Balsa's journey and my own. Let's hope that, like me, Balsa arrives safely at home someday.

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